

## Spring Fever (the warm of glowing love) by ej\_writer

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**Summary:**

All 30 short stories that I wrote for Harringrove April!

## 1. Day 1- First Kiss

When Steve kissed Billy, it tasted of new beginnings and felt like love carried in by the gentle breeze of a spring morning.

Steve had felt the coming of the equinox each time they were together, saw it too, in the way Billy would look to him with adoration and optimism hidden behind those clouded pools of blue sky, but he waited patiently for the turning of the season.

Because Billy was the eternal winter, and he didn't trust in nature's promise that green would wake again. Frostbitten edges, a blanket of unrelenting woes, he was much too cold down to his core to allow himself to experience the life and the love that he didn't believe could come from the broken earth.

But Steve, Steve was the promise. The warmth that would peek from behind bare trees to bring an end to the wilt and the unrelenting death, and, like a flower blooming after its steady emergence from the frozen earth, Billy needed it to flourish, to grow.

It was under his light that Billy had finally allowed himself to thaw, to melt into the unfamiliar feeling until the ice that encapsulated his heart was nothing but a puddle at their feet that would soon be dried by Steve's sun.

When Steve kissed Billy, by will of the earth and her garden, he gave him the password from within the hearts they shared with wind and sky, to allow him to live, and to love again.

## 2. Day 2- April Showers

Let it be known that Billy Hargrove despises the rain. Especially in Indiana, where it was always as cold as ice.

It makes the air thick with the disgusting smell of upturned earth, it ruins his styled hair and soaks his already tight clothes until they cling to him, every last drop of freezing rain like pure torture, a thousand tiny pin pricks to his sun-warmed body.

But let it be known too that Billy was also one hundred percent, irrefutably, head over heels in love with Steve Harrington.

And Steve loved the rain. Each time new storm clouds would roll in over the mellow spring skies, he'd pull back the curtains and remind Billy of that old saying with the same remark, a wistful, "The flowers are going to be so pretty this year, Bill."

Some days he would go out in it, sneaking outside barefoot through the back door without a word about it, just to stand and feel the rain on his skin. Others he would call Billy to come out with him to enjoy nature's phenomena or to play around, like two restless kids under a garden sprinkler when the weather breaks.

It doesn't take much to realize there's a reason behind that urge, so, despite the irritation he felt each time the sky would open up and leave him a soggy mess, Billy doesn't dare object to it.

He had asked Steve once, when they were laying out on the pool chairs, letting the sun and the breeze dry them off after a quick shower had come and gone through, cracking jokes about the faint rainbow that had formed over the house. "What's with you and the rain anyways, Stever?"

Initially, he had shrugged and simply answered, "Oh, I dunno. My mum just never let me go out in it, she was always afraid of me getting sick or something." but his eyes, framed by wet hair plastered across his forehead in drying swoops, reflected that cloudy, swirling sky above them, hiding something deeper beneath the churning. "But you know, it's kind of cleansing too. Like, like all the bad gets

washed off me and I'm the May flowers.”

Billy hadn't known what to do, shocked to hear his boyfriend be so open, so vulnerable, where he was usually guarded, but he held him regardless, as the clouds rolled back in and started their downpour once more, thick rain drops soaking speckled skin, and for the first time he too understood that feeling Steve described.

Physically he felt the tension between them bleed away with the rainwater, the unspoken rule to be their usual guarded selves around one another finally broken at nature's whim.

From then on, the smells and the feelings and the experiences once oppressive grew on him, along with the comfort, the trust, the love that they found, watered like the buds of flowers as they emerged after months without light or air.

Needless to say, Billy Hargrove learned to love the rain.

### 3. Day 3- Spring Break

Billy never really did spring break. He thought it was just a stupid way to flaunt that you were rich and had no responsibilities, neither of which were luxuries he got to experience, and quite frankly, for a lot of kids, it was.

But his senior year, the tops of the class plan a huge (and expensive) trip to Lake Tahoe for the week they have off school, as in the one in California, and he just *cannot* pass by that opportunity. A school sanctioned trip back to his home state, that's like a dream come true.

Of course, he's still got to scrape together the funds to get there, because his dad sure as eggs wouldn't be paying for a spring vacation that cut into Easter Sunday, but that should be easy enough, considering his best friend is basically a walking bank account who had already been trying to convince Billy to come with him for *weeks* before they'd announced the trip.

He was pretty sure at this point that Steve would cave almost immediately, and he's right, because he's not even halfway through asking him how he was planning on getting to Lake Tahoe before he's telling Billy that they should fly up together. To Steve, it's a matter of a couple hundred dollars versus his entire social life being in the toilet.

Or at least that's what Billy thinks, and that's exactly what Steve *wants* him to think, because there's a third, unconsidered option that he's just helplessly in love with his best friend and would do just about anything if it meant he got to spend a little extra time with him.

Except when they get there, they don't follow the crowd of their peers to the hotel they'd all booked, because this is California, the Golden state, the place where Billy Hargrove was born and raised. Their trip was *not* going to be wasted on skiing with a bunch of drunk kids they hardly even liked. Not when Santa Monica was so beautiful this time of year.

They rent a car, and Billy gives Steve the grand tour of the state for

the seven hours they're in the car. It's exhausting, it's cramped, but it's worth every second to see Billy so proud of the place where he grew up. Steve genuinely thinks he couldn't be any more in love with him by the time they're stopping by the Santa Monica Pier in the late afternoon.

Even so late in the day it's warm in California, nothing at all like a Hawkins spring, and Steve can tell why this is where Billy thrives.

They don't have long on the beach before the sun starts to go down, but that's not really why Billy brought him here. He wanted to see Steve's pretty face lit up by the amusement park lights after hours, wanted to see him smile when they played games in the arcade and revel in the flush on his cheeks from the alcohol he knew how to get without an ID.

They're walking side by side down the Santa Monica Pier when Steve stops, leaning against the railing to look out over the water. "You know I've never even seen the ocean before?"

Billy sidles up beside him, leaning back on his elbows and lolling his head to the side to look at Steve. "Well maybe I can take you surfing tomorrow, pretty boy. We've got a whole week up here, bet you'd be a pro after just a few hours."

Steve agrees, looking away from the water to lock eyes with Billy, a confident little smile on his lips. "I did used to be a swimmer."

"That right?" Steve nods, turning back to the view, the sun going down behind the shore line reflecting in his brown eyes. Billy smiles and hums in his throat, "I'd like to see you in the water."

His smooth talk makes a flush creep up on Steve's cheeks, and he chuckles, pushing off from the railing. "Come on, B, it's getting dark. I wanna see this Ferris wheel you told me all about."

Their tickets cost five dollars a piece, and they board after a short wait, the line much smaller than Billy remembers it being from trips here in the summer.

Every time the wheel would stop on the way up to let more people

board, Steve would grab Billy's hand, the ride much bigger than he'd anticipated, and Billy's heart melted a little each time.

At the top, his breath hitches, and Billy asks him, "So? You like it, Stevie?"

"Yeah, it's- beautiful." The only Ferris wheel he'd ever even been on was the dinky one at the summer festival Hawkins held each year, and the view on that thing was just trees and more trees. It was a breathtaking sight.

"Mhm." Billy, resting his chin in his hand and leaning his elbow against the bar that's holding them in the seat, stares at Steve with hooded eyes.

Steve looks bashful when he notices, "What're you looking at?"

"Just enjoyin' the view." Steve rolls his eyes, but he's blushing, so Billy sits up straighter, putting a hand on Steve's cheek and swiping his thumb over his bottom lip. "It's the prettiest I've ever seen."

Steve scoffs in a modest way, like Billy's words are too much, and it's cute. He leans over, and Billy meets him halfway, catching his lips in a chaste kiss. He tasted like cheap mixed drinks and California dreaming. One of Steve's hands finds its place in his hair, tangling in his soft blonde curls, and he brings himself even closer, until the ride moves again, and he startles, pulling away with a gasp.

Billy chuckles, and presses another quick kiss to his hairline. He couldn't be more glad that he was so vulnerable to peer pressure, that the ride was so long and Steve such a romantic.

Especially knowing they had a whole week left in California before they had to go back to Hawkins, because he still had *lots* he wanted to show him.

## 4. Day 4- Rollerskates

Steve isn't much the jealous type, not by a long shot, but he doesn't exactly like being shown up either.

Heather Holloway has a skating party for her 18th birthday in March, which, admittedly is something he thinks is more the speed for middle schoolers, but whatever, it's not his scene.

Except Billy and Heather are the best of friends through circumstances nobody quite understood, and Billy wouldn't let him *not* come as his plus one. He said it'd be fun, it'd be dark and they could hold hands while they skated, but Steve doesn't even know how to skate.

It's not like he's just bad at it either, he literally has no idea how to even start. The closest rink was a forty five minute drive out of Hawkins, a trip he had no one around to make with him as a kid, so he never had the chance to try it out.

Was he going to admit that to Billy when he kissed him on the cheek and asked if he could make it? Absolutely not. But once the day of the party rolls around, he's realizing his mistake.

They're already outside of the building when Steve asks, "Have you ever skated before, Bill?"

"Mhm, lots of times. Couldn't get around the parks in California without knowing how." Billy bumps him with his shoulder as they walk, "What about you, pretty boy? You ever had private rich boy lessons or something?"

His confidence is definitely overplayed in his response, a simple, "Sure."

Something about how hastily he answers must tip Billy off to the fact that it's a bold faced lie though, because he smiles and offers, "Don't sweat it, Stevie. I'll show you the ropes."

When they get their skates, Steve tiptoes onto the rink, using the



stoppers on the front so he can walk without the wheels, but when they're out there Billy tells him to get down. The second all eight wheels are on the ground his legs almost go out from under him, but Billy's right there to catch him by the waist.

They get him to where he can stand in one place pretty easily, so Billy tries to teach him how to move. He tells him it's like walking without picking up your feet, but when Steve tries that, only one of his legs moves, and he would've done a split if Billy wasn't there to hoist him back up.

He tells him to try to move both feet at once, but they just go out from under him. He tells him to hold onto something when he tries next time, so he grabs his hands, but he almost takes them both out when he falls the next time. Billy just laughs, likens him to a certain animated deer, and promises he'll help him get better.

But the problem is that it is absolutely not the case, his promise to 'show him the ropes,' because then Heather's skating over to them, making it look as easy as pie, and he's tailing after her with a hollow promise to come back and help Steve in a few.

So now not *only* is he regretting this whole thing because he's not that graceful when *he* tries it, but his boyfriend is getting dragged away from him too, leaving him to cling to the wall, alone, for dear life.

It's not a skill that just comes naturally like Billy said it would, and it doesn't get any easier, wiping out every two seconds while his friends did circles around him. Every time Steve thinks he has it he's back on the hard floor and Billy's nowhere to be found, off somewhere laughing with Heather, or skating with Heather, probably going on and on all about how Steve Harrington sucked with Heather.

After what must've been the hundredth time landing flat on his ass, Steve just, gives up. He unties the stupid skates and kicks them off, and storms off the rink, sliding in his socks a little on polished wood floors. He goes out through a service door, the bitter sting of tears in his eyes, to brood, since he was alone anyways.

It's not even about jealousy at this point, it's pure humiliation.

Because his boyfriend invited him here for what? Just to rub it in his face that he was talentless, and that he could always find someone better than him?

He feels stupid, sitting on the curb out back of the skating rink, crying his eyes out without even any shoes on, but that's apparently what he'd sunken to. It's no wonder Billy wanted to replace him.

Speaking of the devil, he hears the door swing open again and Billy say from behind him, "What are you *doing* out here, baby, it's fucking freezing."

He sits down beside him on the curb, rubbing his hands together against the chilly breeze, and he must see the leftover tears in his eyes, because he's reaching out to wipe them away, and saying so sweetly, "Talk to me, Steve."

"Take it to Heather. Maybe she'll want to talk about it." Steve isn't in the mood, and he pushes Billy's hand away, looking away when he sees the hurt that shows on his face. "Or-or should I call her *princess* too?"

"Why would I- wait, are you actually jealous?" Billy's tone breaks, from being considerate and soft to accusatory, and it's like another hole is punched right in Steve's heart.

"What do you think?" He snaps at him, more defensive than he knows he should let himself be, "You two were hanging off of eachother all night and-and I was just in the corner falling on my ass every two seconds."

"Yeah? Well, I'm sorry for spending time with my *friend* on her birthday. Sorry that everything's a personal attack to you."

"Oh, cut it with the 'my friend.' Everyone knows you guys are dating anyways." Steve adds with a mumble, "Everyone but me I guess."

Billy just scoffs, his voice rising with frustration at their back and forth, "Where did you even get that idea?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe from the way you look at her like she's everything, and the way you spend more time with her than me."

Maybe because you fucking, beam when you're with her and treat me like I'm nothing!"

Even in the face of Steve's outburst, Billy remains calm, and it makes Steve feel even more self conscious, until he says, "Steve. Heather Holloway is a lesbian."

"She is?" Billy nods, and Steve exhales, shakes his head in disbelief, mostly with himself. The bubble of tension had officially popped, and left him feeling apologetic, "Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?"

Simply, Billy answers, "I didn't think I needed to."

"You didn't. I just- I'm paranoid." He runs his fingers through his hair, and shakes his head, "God, I'm such an idiot. I'm sorry, B."

"Nah, I'm sorry too. Should've been paying more attention to my Bambi." Billy takes his hand, and they sit out in the silence for a while, just the brush of Billy's thumb against Steve's knuckles, the gentle spring breeze carrying away their problems with it. "Whaddya say we try again?"

"Will you hold my hand like you promised this time?"

"Well, I don't know about *that*- " He chuckles at the kicked puppy dog look Steve gives him, and puts an arm around his shoulder. "M'just teasin' you, Stevie. 'Course I will."

Billy kisses the side of his head, and Steve lets his eyes flutter closed for just a minute. He tries not to beat himself up over it, they'd only been dating for a few months, and Billy knew he'd already been cheated on once, but he still feels bad, making a mountain out of a molehill.

But Billy's not upset with him, he doesn't see how he could be. He's a womanizer to everybody but Steve, it's not entirely his fault if he made assumptions. Billy stands up, and offers him his hand, "Now let's get you back in there and show them what they're missing, huh?"

## 5. Day 5- Butterflies

Just past the Hargrove's property line, in the empty lot owned by the city, there's a butterfly garden.

Zinnias and alliums, marigolds and black-eyed Susans (ouch), all planted in lovely rows to attract the butterflies as the season rolls in. A nice little thing for a nice little neighborhood.

It's not until Neil's gone that Billy ever goes to see it. Max used to go sometimes with her little plastic watering can and sit there for hours, when things got to be too much at home.

Now things were different, and it was Billy's turn, when he was feeling overwhelmed by having a sister who genuinely gave two shits and a stepmom who didn't send him packing after his dad skipped town, to go sit by the flowers and just watch.

It's fitting, that it would be butterflies, a symbol of change, that he sought out that comfort in. How much had he changed since Starcourt? How much had their little white house on Cherry changed without the overbearing presence of Neil Hargrove?

Max didn't usually come with him, and he was alright with that, he didn't really want his little sister seeing him cry about *butterflies* anyways.

Other than the occasional elderly woman in gardening gloves or an unattended kid wanting to visit the pretty flowers, the only person he ever met out there was Steve Harrington.

His mother had apparently been part of the committee that had arranged for the garden to be planted in the first place, so every Sunday at three o'clock he came out to help take care of it. Not that Billy was keeping track, of course.

He wore the same overalls each time, the same farmer's hat and yellow tinted sunglasses too. He told the same jokes, and brought the same blue tin watering can with the flowers on the side, but it was somehow incredibly charming.

And really, how was Billy supposed to *not* fall in love with him, the way he hummed as he watered the flowers, taking so much care to make them flourish?

The spring of '87 is a good year for the butterflies. Monarchs, Spicebush Swallowtails, Painted Ladies, they come in swarms to the little garden and it's really a sight.

By then, Billy doesn't go down there as much anymore, he's been out of the hospital a year now, and his trust in Susan and Max is strong enough that he doesn't have to take his problems to the pollinators these days.

But every Sunday except Easter he was still out there, and at three on the dot, Steve would make his appearance.

Today in a light yellow button up with embroidered bees under light blue bibs, covered in dirt and paint stains, the perfect image of spring.

He smiles and waves at Billy, holding his other hand up against the sunlight in his eyes as he makes his approach.

"Guess what," Steve turns around to show him there's a gardening glove and a fake flower sewn to the back of his overalls, as if that's supposed to mean anything to him. "It's the symbol of the garden club, all the ladies used to wear these on their jackets! That means I'm an official member now!"

It makes Billy laugh, his enthusiasm contagious, and he teases, "So *that's* what King Steve is into these days."

"Oh shut up, you're the one with the keg record and you're still sitting in a flower field watching bugs in your free time."

"Touché." He watches Steve watering the flowers, using the peaceful moment to build up his courage to ask, "So I've been hearing about this place from Max, it's a big botanical garden up in Indie. What do you say we go?"

Steve looks up, but his gaze is just past Billy, and his eyebrows are furrowed. "Just us two?"

“Well you don’t usually bring the kids you babysit on dates with you, do you?”

“A-A date?” Steve stutters, the slightest strain of tension in his voice that makes Billy’s already sutured back together heart break into a hundred pieces.

“Look, Steve, if you’re not interested, just say it and get it over with.”

“Billy it’s not like that, I *am* interested.”

He scoffs, “You’re doing a great job at showing it.”

“No really, before you started coming out here, I paid a gardener to do this, but now I look forward to every Sunday more than anything just because I get to be around you. It’s just that I-“ He cuts himself off with a frustrated sound, and Billy, taking it to mean he’s having a hard time letting him down easy, tells him, “Just spit it out, Harrington.”

“I’m afraid of the butterflies, okay?” Steve blurts out, “There’s been a Cabbage White behind you this whole time and he’s *freaking* me out.”

“The butterflies? I just put my neck on the line to ask you for a date, and you were distracted by the *butterflies* .”

“They’re creepy!” Steve crosses his arms over his chest, his face burning red up to his ears with embarrassment. “Look, I’m sorry, I know it’s irrational or stupid or whatever.”

“I never said that.” Billy hooks his pinky finger with Steve’s, smiles when he looks up from the flowers to him with wide eyes. “Actually I think it’s pretty romantic, you facing your fears just to come see me.”

“Really?” Steve says breathless, then corrects himself with a bout of the old Steve’s confidence, “I mean, yeah, I’d do anything for you.”

As good as this year was for the Monarchs and the Painted Ladies, there was no shortage of butterflies in Billy’s heart either, that

nervous flutter stronger than ever when he asks, “So? Does that mean we’re still on for that date then?”

Lacing the rest of their fingers together, the watering can swinging at his other side, Steve smiles wide, “Definitely.”

## 6. Day 6- Stargazing

Billy always made a wish on the first star he saw in the night sky. Starlight, starbright, whatever.

Praying just felt too hollow, like asking someone who he knew wasn't going to listen, who he knew didn't care at all, to help him, but the stars, well the stars meant something.

Because he could *see* them, and if he closed his eyes and focused, he swore he could feel them too, in the shadows that twined around him. Feel the warmth of their light and hear their twinkling, no matter how distantly, and there was something comforting in that.

When his mom left, he asked the stars to watch her, and every night when he dreamed of her, he knew it was them, the stars, in the only way they could giving him his peace of mind, so no matter how many years passed, the first star he saw shining against the vast expanses of blue-black sky, he always had a wish for.

It had started with the simple things, the innocent wishes any child would have, like getting taller overnight, or getting a good grade on a test, but as time went on his pleas to the celestial got more desperate, I wish my mom had meant it when she said she'd be back, I wish my dad would stop hurting me, I wish I wasn't *broken*.

Slowly he lost his faith in the stars. He didn't understand why they weren't willing to listen to him or help when he called for them, why he suffered while they hung in the sky over him, like they were *mocking* him.

On the floor of the Starcourt mall, through the shattered glass ceiling, he catches a glimpse of a star. Just one, hanging bright in the sky, watching over him as he was dying. He'd laugh if he could, he'd scream and cry at the irony if there wasn't blood in his throat, a burning pain in his whole body, but he uses his last bit of strength to make a wish.

For Max, to be able to move past this loss. For his mother still out there somewhere, to never have to hear the news that her baby had



died in such a horrific way. For the life he never got to live and the boy he never got to be. He wished and he wished that these wouldn't be his last moments.

And then he woke up.

He had survived, his wish granted, and Billy was grateful, because he knew then that the stars would always be there when it mattered most.

There are still nights when the going gets rough, where Billy sits out under the night sky and *begs* that this isn't the life he is damned to, *begs* that he could just wake up again from this nightmare of surgeries and an artificially kept life to be himself again, but that isn't what he really wants.

He's grateful for all the wishes that were never granted, all the selfish and hurtful things he'd asked of the stars that were never realized. Because that meant to him that they understood more than he had thought, that they knew when he could do it on his own and would be there when it was most important.

But when he was hurting, regretting, mourning, what he needed was not the stars.

What Billy needed was Max, visiting him at his new apartment with a stack of movies and a box of homemade cookies she made with Susan. A memory of who he was and wanted to be for her again, given the chance, shown through the mundanities and caring gestures of a sister glad to have her brother back.

And what Billy needed was Steve, sliding out of bed with him at absurd hours of the night, his arms around his fragile body while he wept. A deep love almost lost, twin flames almost extinguished by grief, shown by a kiss behind his ear, the whispered promises as his love held him in the dark that everything would be alright.

Now where Billy had once felt lost, betrayed and hurt even by the one thing he thought could guide him, his heart was full with the love of his friends and his family, and too by the light of the moon and stars, silver and softly and soon.

## 7. Day 7- Daisychain

Pluck, twist, pluck, twist, pluck, twist.

When he's upset, Billy has a bad habit of getting himself caught in a rut, repeating the same action over and over again until he's even more worked up.

Most of the time it's chain smoking, lighting up one cigarette after another until his chest burns and he's angrier than when he started, but right now, he had to resort to something else.

Susan was hosting some get-together in their backyard, and Billy had been told explicitly, don't do anything that could embarrass the family and don't try to stay inside and get out of it either, so even though he didn't want a damned thing to do with the bullshit happy family routine, and especially not for Susan's wine drunk mom group, he knew better than to try anything.

There was a shady spot near the edge of their property where he went to brood, not out of sight of the little party but far enough away he finally had some room to breathe.

Finally away from the people, he started feeling jittery, just itching for something to do with his hands, so he plucked a mayweed, stuck his thumb under the flower to pop it off, and put the bitter stem between his teeth.

Max must've been feeling the same pressure to socialize, because she had come over and sat down beside him in the grass not too long after.

When Billy pulled up another daisy, she had scoffed, "You don't have to kill them, you know."

"Shut up, shitbird." He flicked the head of the flower at her this time, smiling fakely when she rolled her eyes.

"God, if you *have* to ruin them you could at least like, make a chain or something."

It was Billy's turn to scoff at her, "Really, Max? Do I look like the type to braid delicate little flowers together?"

"No." She remarked sarcastically, picking up the flower he broke, "But you *do* look like the type who's going to find all these petals in your hair if you don't quit killing my daisies for no reason."

"If I make a stupid daisy chain, you're wearing it." He threatened, but nature is Max's thing, and she had sat up straighter, a smile on her face, "Deal."

So now it was pluck, twist, pluck, twist, pluck, twist, until he had a whole nother chain finished for Max. He ties it off and sits it atop her head, but his hands still need something to do or he's going to tear his hair out as he slips into that same old routine of repetition.

His knuckles are locked from how aggressively he was braiding them by the time he finishes a second one, but he's still got tons of energy to burn and no cigarettes to smoke, so it's pluck, twist, pluck, twist, pluck, twist, again and again.

There are eight crowns in total before Billy decides his fingers are going to break if he keeps going, and he decides he's sacrificed enough flowers. Max tries to stack them all on her head, giggling when the tower of flower crowns tips over, and then they have to decide what to do with them.

Max keeps two, one for herself and her friend El, and gives one to each of the women Susan invited over, getting a smile and a pat on the head from each one. She returns to Billy with one daisy chain left, and puts it on his head.

He shakes it back off immediately, sends a pointed glance towards Neil sitting in a lawn chair, drinking his fourth beer at two in the afternoon, "Gonna have to give this one away too."

"Well don't you have somebody special you can give it to?"

The answer is yes, absolutely he does, but he doesn't know how appropriate it is, showing up at his boyfriend's house with flowers picked out of his own backyard like he's in some kind of puppy love.

So for now he just shrugs his shoulders, a noncommittal response to Max's question, but really, he can't stop thinking about it, delicate white and yellow flowers in chestnut brown hair.

He was supposed to go see Steve after this stupid social was over anyways, maybe he'd take it to him then. Yeah, that would work.

Except once the party's over and he gets his drunken confirmation from Neil that he's free to go, Billy's just sitting in his car outside of Steve's with the daisy chain hanging from his mirror, debating on whether to give it to him or not.

Because he wasn't supposed to be *that* kind of queer or Neil Hargrove would've sniffed him out a thousand times by now. He was masculine, tough, not at all the type to bring his boyfriend fucking daisies.

So it stays in the car, but the whole time they're together, he's still thinking about it, likening soft porcelain skin to white flower petals, lean limbs to sturdy stems, until he decides he's just got to see that pretty face framed by spring blooms.

Right before he leaves, he grabs it out of the car, holds it behind his back, "Got you something, pretty boy."

He steps back onto Steve's stoop and crowns his King, placing the circle of mayweed on top of his head, making Steve blush, just the lightest dusting of pink on his cheeks as he declares, "Oh, I love daisies! Our lawn boy always puts weed killer on all of our flowers, says it makes the yard look nicer, so I never get to see any."

Then he kisses Billy on the cheek, gentle and soft, and tells him, "Thank you, Billy." and closes the front door. In that moment, standing on his boyfriend's stoop at midnight, having brought him flowers and got the sweetest display of affection in return, Billy felt like he was in one of those sad-sap love stories like Susan watched.

And maybe it's a little much, but now how is Billy supposed to just show up at Steve's door without one of the wild daisies that grows out back, since they have so many? Especially when each and every time Steve does the exact same thing, kisses him on the cheek and

puts them in a little vase on the table.

It doesn't take long until he's picked the yard almost barren of any wild daisies just to see that sweet smile on Steve's face again.

Now the only thing that could ruin this for him would be- "William Reuben Hargrove, *what* did you do to all of my daisies?"- if Max found out he'd picked her flowers.

It was so worth it.

## 8. Day 8- Rebirth

### Summary for the Chapter:

This is a mini song fic. You can read it on my tumblr (@thehairingrove) with the lyrics written into it or listen to the song When The River Meets The Sea by John Denver and Jerry Nelson.

Where do we go after we're gone?

Steve, having grown up a sheltered child, far away from loss and hardship, had never thought about the question in too much detail. Frankly, were it not for the death of Barbara Holland, it may never have even crossed his mind at all.

The day they bury Billy Hargrove, the angels weep for him, their tears soaking the earth as he's lowered into it, leaving behind more than he could ever know, ever had the chance to realize. Billy hadn't been afraid of death, in some ways he'd even *dared* it to touch him, stood up in the face of danger and said "You won't take me." But then it did.

And now for those who were left, that inconceivable question is left to sit heavy in their minds again. Where was Billy going to end up?

Was it a bad sign for the angels to cry? Were they not tears of blessing, for a peaceful afterlife under the cold earth, but rather of mourning for their own loss, a young soul damned to Hell for the things he'd been forced to do? But that couldn't be the case, Billy had earned his place in the kingdom of heaven after the things he had to face and overcome, to sacrifice both in life and in death. Right?

Either way it wasn't fair. Billy should still be alive, living and learning and growing. He was only eighteen years old, who should have to worry about these things, when it came to a life barely lived?

Steve does, worry that is. All the questions left unanswered, the things left undone and the words left unsaid, they haunt him.

Echoes of nightmares keep him awake in his bed, memories better off forgotten replaying behind his eyelids over and over again, no end in sight to his suffering until he's depressed and sick. Everyone worries about him, but that doesn't make him feel any better. They don't think about Billy as much as they do him. Why should they, they say, what does it matter if he's already dead?

So they fuss over the living instead, over Max when she goes radio silent for weeks at a time, over Will and El when they have to leave, over Steve, when nobody sees him for months on end, holed up in his lonely mansion and forgetting to take care of himself.

The assumption they made, watching his downfall from the outside, was that far too many times that had almost been in Billy's shoes, the young boy killed trying to protect others. They genuinely think that the likeness between them is the only reason the fate of Billy Hargrove was too much for him to bear. But in truth, it went much, *much* deeper than that, in ways nobody but Steve knew, or likely would ever know now.

Because Steve loves Billy, and Billy had loved him too. For the last five months before the summer of '85 rolled around, they'd been in love, sneaking kisses in the dark after work, taking long drives out of town just to get away. They had plans to leave Indiana together. To go to school together. They were supposed to be together until the very end.

And then he'd been killed, *murdered* in front of Steve's eyes, and that horrible end came much sooner than either of them could have ever predicted. Steve holds so much regret in his heart because of what happened to Billy. If he had just been there, if he hadn't been so afraid, if he had, if he hadn't, so much misplaced blame he feels falls on his shoulders. It just wasn't *fair* what had happened, and all he wants is to know why. Why did He have to take him so soon?

Everyone has a different answer to that question, and it only makes Steve feel more hopeless without answers. They say there is a time for everyone, but did that make it fair? They say too, that he was in a better place, but they can't promise that that's true. Not when he could be alive and healthy. There's some part of Steve that truly wants to believe he'll see Billy again, he *needs* to believe it really, but

the how and the when and the why all make him feel so frustrated. Like maybe there was some part of him that had already.

Like maybe when he felt that out of body sense that he wasn't alone, or hears whispers from nobody in the dark, or makes choices he wouldn't normally or says things that don't sound like himself, that *that's* Billy. He'd feel better, knowing that Billy was still with him, but there is no concrete answer, no evidence that he isn't just deluding himself to cope, and it makes him want to scream, to tear himself apart and just give up. Why couldn't the universe just *tell* him where his love has gone, that he isn't just crazy or alone or at fault so he can finally have his peace? So he can have a reason to keep going?

On Steve's birthday in the first winter after they bury Billy, a cardinal sits in the tree in the Harringtons front lawn, his beautiful red feathers standing out against the pure white snow, thick blood smeared on white tile floors, healing bruises and cuts littering skin gone pale, and it *breaks* Steve.

He drops to his knees in the front yard, heavy sobs he can't control echoing through the neighborhood and the empty winter sky, blending with the call of a songbird. Because that was the answer to his question.

*That* was his Billy showing him that he was there, watching over him.



## 9. Day 9- Blue

“Which one should I wear?”

Steve is standing in front of their closet holding up two shirts in desperate need of ironing, one navy blue and the other forest green, on hangers hooked on each of his index fingers. He’s trying to decide what to wear to a job interview for the school. He’d gone to school like everyone said he wouldn’t, and now he was going to be an english teacher.

Billy’s sitting back on the bed, his ankles crossed and his arms folded behind his head for the best view of Steve getting ready, and he just shrugs a little and says, “They look the same to me.”

With a huff, Steve’s arms drop to his sides, the shirts swinging on their hangers. “I’m serious Bills, this is a *big* deal.” He turns to the mirror and holds them up one at a time, comparing which looks better, “I’ve got to look my best.”

“Please, you look good in anything. What’s it matter what you’re wearing anyways?”

“It matters because I *need* to get this job.” He insists, a frustrated edge to his tone, then holds the shirts back up, “Now which one?”

But Billy’s not exactly feeling listened to either, and he’s got something of a temperment himself as he says, “I don’t *know*, Steve, just wear whatever one you want to wear.”

The shirts are hung back up in the wrong spots with aggression and Steve turns back around on Billy, in an exasperated voice shouting, “Why don’t you care about this, Billy? I’m trying to get this job for *you*.”

They’d done enough of this petty arguing early on in their relationship, long before the both of them had been landed in therapy, that Billy knows better than to keep fighting back.

He moves so he’s sitting on the edge of the bed with his feet on the

floor, and says softly, “Come here,” Steve grumbles but he does, standing between Billy’s knees but not looking at him as he wraps his arms around his waist. “What color would you say those shirts are?”

“What color-“ Pulling back a little in his arms, Steve starts to argue again, but then his face falls, a look of realization dawning on him, “Oh my god, I am so stupid.”

Billy is colorblind, tritanopic, and, as they learned because of years of mistaking the cobalt Camaro for more of a jade color, he can’t even begin to tell the difference between blue and green. He genuinely thought Steve was making him choose between two of the same shirts.

It was a recent enough discovery, the fact that Billy’s world of color was so vastly different from Steve’s own, that he wasn’t particularly bothered by it, he understood it was hard to remember something so common as that when he hadn’t even noticed it for the first 18 years of his life until Steve pointed it out.

He kisses the top of Billy’s head, leaning his weight into where he’s holding him around his waist. “I’m sorry for picking a fight, Bill. I’m just so stressed”

“S’alright, baby.” Billy can feel how tense Steve is, and tries to assure him, “But you know you’re overqualified. I bet you’d get that job if you showed up in sweatpants.”

Steve hums and pulls away from him back to the closet, where he picks out only one of the hangers, the one with the wrinkled navy blue shirt, and drapes it across his torso, “I think I’ll go with this one though, since blue’s your color, Blue.”

## 10. Day 10- Peaches

“Here kitty, kitty. Come get your goddamn treats.”

Billy’s on his knees in the backyard, his face pressed into the ground as he reaches blindly under the shed for the orange and white cat who moved right into their yard. She had babies in their empty doghouse last spring, but even now that the litter was all grown up and wreaking havoc on the neighborhood elsewhere, mama kitty refused to leave.

It wasn’t like her being there ever particularly bothered Billy, she was outside, he was inside or not home at all, so he didn’t see why it mattered that she wanted to sleep on their porch every now and again.

At least not until Neil said he’d put antifreeze in the cat food Max left on the porch if he caught her digging up Susan’s flower beds again, and Neil Hargrove had never made a promise he didn’t intend to keep, so then it was absolutely necessary that Billy get to this cat first.

Everything else, he’d already tried, hiding the food inside, which Max, oblivious to Neil’s threat, had put right back the next morning, putting oranges and mothballs and everything else that was supposed to repel stray cats in the garden, but everytime, the cat came back. She wouldn’t stay away.

So this was his last resort, getting scratched to shit every time he got close to her, over extending his shoulder from reaching so far under where he’d cornered her, and getting covered in dirt, all just to catch some poor little flea bag.

It’s hot outside, he’s bleeding, and he just wants to catch this stupid thing so whatever Neil does to her won’t be on his conscious, but he’s done. He rolls over onto his back, out of breath and holding his hand up to assess the stinging red scratches all over it.

And what do you know, the moment he’s given up, the little shit crawls out and just sits right on his chest like she wasn’t tearing him

to shreds a second ago.

He chuckles, something between frustration and genuine amusement, tipping his head back on the grass and sighing. "So you gonna let me help you now, kitty cat?"

He brings his hand up to her and she bumps her head against it, and already he's starting to figure her out. Like him, it seems miss kitty here trusts on her terms and hers alone, and it's claws out if you try to push her boundaries.

Actually catching her wasn't really something Billy thought he'd be able to do, so he didn't have a plan now that that had happened. He pets down her back, feeling every last one of her vertebrae as he does so, and says absently, "What are we gonna do with you now, pretty kitty."

And that gives him an idea, as to where he could take her far far away from his dad, and that's Steve's house all the way over in Loch Nora. A pretty kitty for his pretty boy.

He picks her up off his chest so he can sit up without her running away, her claws digging into his shoulder protected only by a tank top thin enough that she digs right into his skin. But even though she's holding on for dear life, she's not fighting him, so that's a good sign

He stands up with one hand, the other still supporting the cat, and he gets to work on getting her out of here before Neil can get home from work and throw a wrench in his plan.

Max had bought and borrowed from Dustin all kinds of food and toys and beds for the spoiled porch cat, which was part of the reason why Neil was so bothered by her so much in the first place, so he carries her inside and calls for Max to help him get all that stuff together so he can take her to Steve.

They get it all in a box that Max carries to the car for him. Before he gets in, the cat now standing on his shoulders, she asks, "Where are you taking her?"

“A friend.” He answers simply, and Max scrunches her nose, asking, “Why?”

“Neil’s allergic, asked me to do something about her leavin’ her dander everywhere.” He lies and, judging from the look on her face, Max knows it’s not true, but doesn’t really want the full story anyways.

The entire time in the car, the cat climbs on the back seats screaming her little head off, and Billy’s not sure if she’s afraid or if getting her out of the elements just unlocked some part of her personality he had yet to see. Either way, he feels ridiculous telling her every two seconds, “Okay, I get it.” and “Stop complaining, I’m taking you somewhere nice.”

When he gets to Steve’s, he leaves his car running with the cat still inside, just in case he were to hate the idea of having a pet and he had to take her somewhere else. He hopes not, doesn’t know where he’d take her in that case except maybe Tommy’s, but they let their cats outside anyways, defeating the purpose.

He knocks on the door, partially forgetting how much of a mess he is after chasing her until Steve opens the door, his wide eyes as he reaches and grabs one of his hands, all scabbed over with itchy scratches. “What happened, Bill?”

“It’s nothin’ bad this time, I was catchin’ a cat.”

Steve narrows his eyes, not believing his cover because of the countless other bruises and cuts he’d shown up at his door with, and as many lies as he’d tried to cover them up with, “A cat?”

“Yep. Momma kitty was living in our backyard, and Neil wasn’t too happy ‘bout it.”

“Well? Did you catch her?”

“Mhm, she’s out in my car right now.”

His tone switches, having apparently grilled Billy enough to believe him, “And you brought her to me?”

“Is that okay?”

“Yes! I’ve never had a cat! Go get her!”

The second he opens the car door the cat jumps out and he catches her, swinging her up to hold her on his shoulders again, and this time, she doesn’t even claw at him.

Steve gasps all dramatically when he sees her and holds his arms out for Billy to her over to him. He pretends it doesn’t bother him when she cuddles right up under Steve’s chin, purring like he’d never heard her as if she wasn’t being a little hellion to him this morning. “What’s this little ladies’ name?”

Billy shrugs, “Didn’t give her one yet. Figured if I was dumping her on you you might as well get to pick it.”

“What’s your name sweet girl?” Steve coos at her, scratching her between her ears, “How about... Peaches!”

“Peaches? Stevie, that’s a little boring, don’t you think?”

“Nope!” He holds her up to his face and rubs their noses together, “Is your name Peaches, pretty kitty?”

The little shit meows, and Steve looks at him all smug like it means anything. Billy chuckles, and gives in, Steve always knows how to bend his will, “Alright, alright, Peaches it is.”

He reaches out to pet Peaches and she swats at him, making Steve bite the inside of his cheek to hold back a laugh, and Billy’s wondering if he made a mistake bringing her here.

A pretty kitty for his pretty boy, but she turned out to be a spoiled little princess to the King.

## 11. Day 11- Hug

Steve always kept one of Billy's hoodies in his locker in the back room at Scoops.

It was too cold because of the freezers, and between turns slinging ice cream with Robin, he liked to be able to slip one of his boyfriends hoodies on over top of the cheap uniform to try to keep warm.

He switched them out often, both so nobody at home would become suspicious of Billy's missing clothes and so Billy could wear them all, and they'd come back to him smelling like that familiar mix of cigarette smoke and cologne so strong it made his nose itch.

Billy used to say it was ridiculous and remind him that he had his own collection of expensive jackets at home, but he could never hide the way he'd smile when he saw Steve wearing his clothes.

There's still one in the locker when the mall is closed down, though that's the least of his worries, with all the other things they have to get in order. He forgets all about it, really, at least until the day there's a knock at his door, and the manager of Scoops Ahoy is standing on his porch with a box full of his things that had been recovered from the gutted mall before it was torn down to be rebuilt.

His wallet and his spare house keys were in there, along with a book he borrowed from Robin that he never actually intended on reading, a half empty can of hairspray, and a spare t-shirt, he empties onto the dining table, but then his breath hitches, and he has to swallow a lump in his throat, because all folded up at the very bottom of the box, was Billy's senior hoodie.

When it went missing from his car, Billy had asked him, "You have your own, Stevie, what do you need mine for?" Never would Steve have thought the answer to that question would be to remember him by.

He holds it up with shaky hands, and hugs it to his chest, but he doesn't have the heart to put it on, it feels like sacrilege, now that Billy's gone. Like if he were to wear it, he'd be tainting the only thing

he had to remember him by, so it stays folded up tight and hidden in the top corner of his closet where his mother won't find it and wash it.

But every day that goes by, Steve misses him more and more until the aching in his chest is unbearable, and he's got to find a way to chase the feeling of his Billy being there with him in any way he can.

Steve gets the hoodie down from the closet, and just sits with it in his lap, feeling guilty for even thinking about wearing it, but he *needs* it. Needs some assurance that he isn't alone before he gets too desperate and does something drastic.

He slips it over his head and pushes the hood down, and just sits on his bed, hugging his knees to his chest. He pretends it's Billy's arms wrapped around him instead of his own, his warmth on his skin and his smell enveloping him as he held him close.

The dark green material gets stained with his tears, the false hug doing nothing for him but bringing back memories of Billy, of times when he was actually there with him. But in a way it still helps him, takes that emptiness in his chest and changes it to a pressure, brings him overwhelming emotion in the absence of feeling.

After that, Steve allows himself to wear the hoodie whenever he's feeling particularly lonely, which is, quite frankly, most of the time anymore, and he's devastated once the smell of him wears off it, but he swears to *never* forget the way it felt to actually hug Billy. To be held in the arms of someone who genuinely cared for him and who he cared for.

Billy would never come back, that was something Steve had to learn to come to terms with as time went on, but the moment he realized there were different ways to cherish his memory and to grieve, that was when knew he'd be okay.



## 12. Day 12- Soda

Steve doesn't ever drink pop.

He had a can of orange crush just once after Tommy found out his mom didn't let him drink sugary drinks and smuggled him one, and he ended up in the hospital with ketones because he couldn't control his sugar afterwards so, never again.

Honestly, he doesn't think he's missing out on much, carbonation makes his stomach turn and most pop tastes disgusting anyways.

But, diabetes or not, he's still got a sweet tooth, so every year when the spring festival comes to downtown, the double dose of insulin is worth it for a cherry pop float like you can't get anywhere else.

He went every year, usually to impress his latest fling, but this time he doesn't have one, so he brings Dustin and his little brat pack along with him with the promise of buying them each something from the craft show *and* a ride pass for the Ferris wheel just so he wouldn't have to be the loser who came to the festival alone for a hint of nostalgia and a potentially lethal dose of sugar. (he hadn't really stooped that low yet, had he?)

But just because Steve can't catch a break, Billy decides he wants to come too.

Since he's not from around here, Steve's guessing he doesn't know, but if you weren't acting as the overwhelmed babysitter, you come to the spring festival to celebrate the season of love.

The very last thing he needs right now is his best friend who he *totally* doesn't have a crush on spending the day with him at the damned romance festival.

Especially because once they get to the fair, Billy makes sure to get rid of the kids by opening Steve's wallet, so there went Steve's sad sap excuse for being here along with his thirty bucks, and then he was alone with the one person who was going to make this hard.

Everything Billy wants to do is conveniently the things *couples* were supposed to do together, the games where you were won your girlfriend something nice, the rides you only went on with your sweetie, and it's driving Steve up the wall.

Between doing everything he'd done with every last one of his girlfriends since he was 12 with his not crush and the fact that he knows that's not Billy's true intention, he's just so done being here.

After the carousel (the carousel!) is when Steve just can't take it anymore, and he snaps at him, "Can we just get what I came here for already?"

Billy looks surprised by his attitude, his ego knocked down a few pegs and he says simply, "Alright."

In line, he tells him, "You're paying. You owe me for that money you gave to the kids."

"Puh-lease, they were going to get it off of you by the end of the night anyways." Struggling against the disgustingly tight jeans he's wearing, Billy fishes his wallet out of his pocket, and forks the money over regardless, "But I'll buy you your drink anyways, princess."

"Thank you." Steve says snootily, pretending like he was better than him when really, just the thought of Billy Hargrove buying him a drink was making his heart do flips.

Steve decides he's had enough of this stupid festival for one night, so they take the floats back to their cars, sitting out in the parking lot on the hood of the Camaro.

The second Steve takes a sip of that sugary concoction he gets a headache, but it was *so* worth it. Usually he stuck to all the rules, and if he could only get his sugar high once a year when the fair came to town, then so be it.

Except, because it had been a whole year, there was one unfortunate side effect to drinking pop he always forgot about: hiccups.

As if things couldn't get any worse, he just *had* to start with the hiccuping, over and over again until his stomach hurt and he was

ready to tear his hair out.

And of course Billy is staring at him too, a smirk playing at his lips, stained red from the soda pop, but then instead of poking fun, he kisses him out of nowhere. Like it's nothing at all, he just leans over and presses his lips to his all sweetly.

He pulls away all too soon for Steve's liking, and asks after a few seconds, teasing smile on his face, "So? Are they gone?"

Steve furrows his eyebrows, confused, until he realizes Billy meant his hiccups, and that meant he'd only kissed him to try to shock him. In an instant his heart feels like it's been ripped from his chest, knowing that it wasn't genuine when that was all he could want.

"I-I think so." He agrees, though in his heartbreak he feels the need to clear things up, "But was that real or was it just because of the hiccups?"

"Not unless you want it to be."

"I do." Billy raises an eyebrow, his lips pressed into a flat line, and Steve flushes, realizing his mistake, "No wait, I *do* want you to have meant it, don't want it to be fake."

Now it's Billy's turn to be upset with Steve, as he crosses his arms and says, frustrated, "Well now *I'm* the one that's confused. Should I have done that or not?"

But Steve is tired of talking in circles, so instead of saying anything else and burying himself deeper, he's the one grabbing Billy by the lapels of his shirt and kissing him hard.

This time, he gets a taste of Billy, cherry soda and nicotine and everything he ever wanted on his tongue.

Billy pulls away first for a breath, wide smile on his face as he prompts, "I'll take that as a yes?"

Steve shoves him, "Oh shut *up*." and lets him kiss him again, soft and sugary sweet.

### 13. Day 13- Hayfever

Ah spring time, the season of love and life and growth, or rather in Steve's case, the season of runny noses and long days spent sick in bed.

He swears he has the *weakest* immune system known to man, so many allergies to everything, ranging from tomatoes to sheep's wool to different types of grass, so when the flowers and the trees start to bloom every year, he's in big trouble.

By now he'd learned to just sort of deal with it, the constant bouts of hay fever that usually lasted from April to July, by taking as many cough drops and benadryl as he wanted and keeping a pocketful of tissues on standby. His parents didn't believe he had allergies anyways unless they were anaphylactic, and accused him of faking every time they made him sick, so it was just part of his life by now.

When Billy finds that out, he's honestly confused, even he gets the sick in bed treatment from Susan when he gets the flu once every winter, so he takes it upon himself to baby Steve whenever he gets sick.

Which, you know, Steve would *like* to complain about, argue with him and say he could do it on his own, but really, his boyfriend coming over every other day while migraines were kicking his ass just to make him feel better was exactly what he needed.

Robin hates his guts for missing so much work now that he has a reason not to tough through his awful allergies and go into work anyways, thus landing her with all the double shifts, but really, how is he supposed to not savor the opportunity to be taken care of like nobody had ever offered to before?

Only, too many days where Billy made himself right at home in his house, holding him while he got the shivers and making him soup and all that got him spoiled, and Robin would definitely kill him if she knew this, but he starts *pretending* to be sick.

Calling his manager and sniffing a little too much into the phone just

to sell it, then calling Billy immediately after to ask if he could come over.

And Billy's smart, he can probably tell when Steve's in a better mood and fake coughing instead of when he's genuinely fighting his allergies, but if he does, he doesn't say anything.

So for now, Steve is absolutely going to use his boyfriend's soft spot for him to his advantage (and the fact that the Scoops manager can't fire him, being a Harrington and all), and appreciate every last one of these lazy days together, gentle fingers carding through his hair, wrapped up in blankets he didn't need, before allergy season was up, and he'd have to give up this royalty treatment.

He asks him on one of the days when he is actually sick, delirious with a fever and covered in an itchy rash after the neighbor's grass had just been mowed, if Billy was still going to love him after he's done being his nurse, to which he replies, under the assumption he wouldn't remember it after a sickness nap, "I'll love you forever, Stevie."

And if Steve wasn't already gone for him, or you know, halfway in a benadryl coma when Billy had said it, that would've done been what did him in for sure.

## 14. Day 14- Roadtrip

When Billy got out of the hospital, things seemed golden. He'd made it through all of the surgeries, hit every last recovery milestone he was supposed to, it seemed for a long time like they had made it out of the rough.

But in '95 they find skin cancer, several lesions hidden among the scars and the freckles all over Billy's body. They tell him it's because of the immunosuppressants he takes for the transplanted lung, and that it's spread too much already, that it's inoperable, and his heart is too weak for chemo.

So now it's just a waiting game, one that's *much* harder than when they were looking for a donor, or counting down the days until he got to go home with Steve, because this time, they're not waiting for their happy ending.

It had taken quite a bit of time even after being discharged for Billy to get his strength back enough to leave the house for more than a few minutes at a time, and during those lazy days recovering on Steve's couch, he had made a list of all the things he wanted to do with his second chance once he was better.

It was never supposed to be a bucket list, but after being diagnosed with cancer, Billy had enough of the pity, and of the people mourning him before he was even gone, so he decided he wasn't just going to sit around on his ass until he withered away. He was going to make the most of what he had, and go through every item on that list.

Some of them were just simple little goals, made up when he still thought the concept was silly and was just throwing ideas out there, like kissing Steve in the rain or having one of the really good strawberry milkshakes from Benny's. Others were a little harder to achieve, like getting married, for which they settled on wearing each other's rings. They didn't need a real ceremony anyways.

Every red line they scratch through another thing on that list feels to Billy like an inhibition off his shoulders, another mark he got to make

on the world before he left, and a memory of him for the one person he loved to hold dear. But to Steve, it felt like a clock, ticking away at the time they had left together, a reminder that they'd never be able to do this or that ever again.

Still, he's right there by Billy's side doing all the things they were supposed to make last for the rest of their lives at just shy of thirty years old, pushing through with a smile on his face, because he wanted to be there for him. Now just wasn't the time to be selfish, or sad, or worried about anything other than making sure Billy was happy, and feeling lucky for the fact that they still did have some time.

When Billy dies in the spring of 1996, there's only one item on his list left unchecked; Go Visit Momma.

Billy had decided he didn't want her to see him in the state he was in, and that he'd really rather not open that can of worms on his deathbed anyways, and Steve could respect that, but now Billy was gone, and he thought he would have wanted his mother to know.

He tossed around just calling her or sending her a letter, but that felt like the wrong way to go about breaking the news, so he does it himself, driving all the way out to Anaheim.

It's painful, making the drive to California, he drives with the windows down and cries probably the entire way up, listening to the mixtapes Billy made for him in high school. He can't stop thinking about how the passenger seat is empty, how when he gets back, Billy won't be waiting to greet him with a kiss. How they were supposed to do this together.

Steve finds his mother sitting out on her porch, at the address he found in the phone book. It makes him sick to his stomach, knowing this could've been where Billy grew up if things were different. Knowing too that he'd still be alive, if that were the case.

She looks just like her picture, at least the only one he'd ever seen of her, tear stained and faded from years kept in a locket around Billy's neck, only the woman in front of him was a little older, and her blonde hair a little shorter.

Her face turns to a grimace when she sees him get out of the car, like she already knows why he's there. There's no pleasantries, Steve's short and to the point, unable to look her in her eyes as he tells her simply, Billy is dead.

She doesn't ask who he is, or what had happened. She doesn't even cry, just thanks him, and goes inside her house, telling Steve without words that there was nothing else for him here.

It's starting to make more sense, why Billy told him he didn't want to come see her, starting to click in Steve's mind that he wasn't sparing his mother's feelings when he made that choice.

He leaves her house with a heavy pit of anger and grief deep in his heart, but he stays in California for another week, driving through all the cities Billy told him about growing up in, doing all the things Billy swore he'd take him to do someday, when he was independent, when he felt better, if he had the time.

It's bittersweet, really, but as much as he'd give anything to have Billy there with him, there was part of him that knew he was. Just by doing the things that they had promised to do together, he was there.

On his way back to Hawkins, Steve makes his own list. No grand concepts or little jokes like Billy's had, his list is simple, just three little things: to be fair to himself, to always be the bigger person, and to never, *ever* forget Billy Hargrove or his love, and all that it did for him.



## 15. Day 15- Sun

Before he settled on ice cream slinging, Steve had attempted being a lifeguard too.

Because, even though he isn't the best at swimming, or paying attention, or dealing with kids or sitting out in the heat all day long, Billy was also going to be a lifeguard, and any job where he got to stare at his crush, wearing nothing but tiny red shorts all day long was obviously the one he wanted.

Except, he's so focused on the chance to fawn over Billy Hargrove, he forgets (ignores) one *very* important detail; Steve and the sun are not friends.

His skin is much too sensitive for all the chemicals that are in sunscreen, but so fair that it burns super easy, so he's got stay covered in the sun. But he's also supposed to dress light because he gets hot easier with his blood sugar, so then it's just a never ending cycle of rashes and burns and sweating his ass off. It's for a very good reason that he thrives in the winter.

So Steve's first day on the job, he's out there in the chair getting baked. His face is burnt after like, an hour, and he has to wear his pool hoodie, but it's much too hot for that and he's starting to feel a little woozy, out of it. But somehow that's not even the worst part, because he finds out too that he and Billy were put on opposite schedules, his shifts always coming right after Steve's, so all this suffering would be for nothing.

Slowly his thoughts melt into mush out there under the harsh sun beating down on him, and one pool check turns into two, then three, and *finally*, even though he doesn't really do much of anything beyond staring and sweating and being thirsty, his shift is over.

Steve's body is on autopilot going back to the locker room after the final break, and honestly, his legs probably would've gone out from under him otherwise. He's so busy trying to just get his things and get out of there before he can't that he doesn't even notice Billy by his own locker, and he bumps right into him.

“Woah, watch it Harrington. No scratching the paint.” He jokes, but then he gets a good look at Steve, and he must look as bad as he feels because then Billy’s asking him, “Are you okay?”

Steve shakes his head, which makes him feel even dizzy, and Billy tells him, one hand on his back and steering him to one of the benches, “Here sit down.”

Billy disappears for a second, or least just out of the blurry line that is Steve’s sight, then tosses him a water bottle and his glucometer out of his locker, “Got you a water. You need to check your sugar too.”

It beeps, and says he’s at 262, which is way high for him especially, and Billy must know it, because he asks, “Jesus Steve, how long were you out there?”

“Just my shift.”

“Six hours did that to you?” Steve shrugs and focuses on downing the water bottle while Billy talks, “You’ve got to find a different job, man. This one’s going to kill you.”

“It’s nothing.” He waves him off, but Billy doesn’t let up, “It’s heat stroke is what it is, and your body’s going to fall apart if your sugar does that every time.” Billy crosses his arms, and says very matter-of-factly, “You can’t be a lifeguard, Steve.”

“I only wanted to be one for you. I thought that we could like, hang out more if we worked together.”

“Yeah, well we could also hang out even more if you survive this summer. M’not gonna let you kill yourself so you can be my friend, idiot.”

Steve rolls his eyes, and remarks, at least enough of his strength coming back to be sarcastic, “Wow. That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“I try my best.” Billy says and sits down next to him on the bench, “So what’s your fallback?”

“Scoops Ahoy.”

"That's an ice cream parlor right?" Billy asks, and Steve nods in response, to which Billy remarks, "S'not a very good job for a diabetic either, but it's better than cooking yourself alive. And you know, you in that little sailor suit might be quite the sight."

"Might be? I'm going to be the hottest sailor in town."

Billy laughs at him, shoving him gently, "But for real, if it's me you wanted Stevie, it's me you got. I'll come visit you every day at Scoops."

Steve asks, stupefied, "Why?"

"Somebody's got to keep an eye on you, make sure you don't eat all the ice cream and get sick." The disappointment he feels in his heart must be apparent, because then Billy leans forward, one hand finding its place on Steve's check, and says, close enough Steve can feel each syllable against his lips, "And you know, for this."

Billy kisses him softly, and with a surprised intake of air through his nose, Steve kisses him back, his eyelids fluttering closed, but of course the moment he'd been waiting for, got this stupid job for in the first place, would be interrupted. Heather throws open the door and calls inside, making them both jump, "Billy, your turn in the chair starts in like, two minutes, get your butt out here now."

"Comin' Hetty." Billy calls back to her, standing up, then says to Steve, "You better quit your damn job."

"I will, I will."

"And tell me your new schedule at Scoops."

"I will Billy, go to work."

"Okay." He turns to walk away, then comes right back, "One more kiss?"

Steve kisses his cheek, and shoves him gently, "Now go."

He watches fondly as Billy basically skips out of the locker room, a goofy smile on his face that gets wiped off the instant he's in view of

the pool's crowd. He's so caught up in Billy he almost forgets how awful he feels.

Almost, but the itchy warmth in his face is coming back, and the heaviness in his limbs and the greasy feeling from being out in the sun too long. Steve's more than glad his mom drove him to work that morning, because otherwise he doesn't know how he would've gotten home.

His mother not even half as enthusiastic when he breaks the news about quitting his job after one single day of work as he is, but Steve really couldn't care less, because he'd gotten everything he wanted, and then some.

## 16. Day 16- Nostalgia

On just about every flat surface in their mansion, Steve's mother had put out some fancy Tiffany light fixture.

Steve's room was the only place in the whole house he got to have any day in the interior design, and his lamp, well it didn't quite have a stained glass shade, or ornate detailing to fancy up the mansion, his happens to be an old nursery lamp from when he was six and still had a themed bedroom.

At the peak of his too cool for school teenager bullshit, he'd attempted to throw it out, sent it away to the curb with a bag of stuffed animals he claimed he didn't need anymore, but the very same night he started having nightmares again, so he scrambled to get it back before the raccoons found it first.

That dusty old lamp had saved him from countless nights spent awake and terrified, and he wasn't one to say he was ashamed of that.

Except, now Billy Hargrove, the pinnacle of badass, is in his room, and there it is, still plugged in on the nightstand.

Of all things too, it couldn't have just been a generic race car lamp or something he could play off as not really being for kids, it *had* to be stupid Bambi.

There's a story behind it, that when he was a toddler, his first venture out of Indiana was to go see his gramma over in Maryland, and, after one look at his big brown eyes and his fluffy brown hair, she immediately nicknamed him Bambi.

After that the name just sort of stuck with him, his parents using it when they wanted on his good side, to make up for forgetting his birthday, or as an apology for leaving him alone so long the babysitter left, so of course his mom thought it would be adorable if his bedroom was themed around it.

Somewhere in a dusty corner of the attic, he still had the curtains and

the quilt and the wall hangings, and under his bed was a pillow embroidered with his name and a picture of the clumsy cartoon deer made by his grandma. And of course, there was the brightly shining lamp.

He would never admit that he kept them there for when he was at his most frightened, clutching the pillow to his chest during a nightmare, or wrapping the soft material of the tiny old quilt around his shoulders when he felt an imaginary pair of eyes watching him.

Because Steve had seen some shit, he felt that after witnessing a ten-foot tall faceless monster come through the ceiling and try to kill him, and having a herd of baby versions of that same monster charge at him with nothing but a baseball bat to protect himself and a group of defenseless children, he had earned the right to use a damn nursery lamp in his bedroom.

But, that ass-backwards swell of pride at still using his childhood comfort items at 19 years old is definitely crushed by the fact that, after being in his room for a grand total of five minutes, that's immediately what Billy drifts to.

A drunken apology at a New Year's party might have made up for the concussion and proved he was *probably* not going to beat his face in again, but it didn't change the fact that he was in Steve's bedroom with the edge of the printed lampshade pinched between his fingers, and a contemplative look on his face.

It was a little while after their truce was reached, that Billy just started showing up at the Harringtons' door unannounced. Sometimes it was to borrow Steve's first aid kit. Sometimes he'd steal some of his weed. Once he'd come over just to watch something on Steve's TV. Whatever his reason, Steve had let him in every time.

In this particular instance, it had been Steve who had called Billy, because he had a math project *and* an essay due first thing tomorrow morning, and Nancy was too busy to help him.

At first he'd considered just not getting the work done, but he decided Billy would do. He was smart enough that the co-ed teacher in the math class they shared had begged him to switch to the

advanced classes, so Steve figured his help wouldn't be so bad.

But his desk where all of his school stuff is is upstairs in his bedroom, where he's left out the dumb baby lamp, and of course that would be exactly what Billy goes straight for. Steve feels himself start to panic a little, unsure if he could trust Billy's reaction, and convincing himself that Billy might beat his ass for being a fragile little fairy or something.

It never comes, Billy just sits down all casual on the bed next to Steve, pulling one of his legs up so he could cross it over his knee, and nods over at the lamp again. "Wish I still had something from when I was little."

The weight of the entire universe is lifted from Steve's chest, knowing that Billy isn't going to tear his head off. He lets out a sharp breath he didn't know he was holding in. "Yeah?"

Billy nods and looks down, fidgeting with the pendant he always wore around his neck. "My dad threw everything out. All I have is one little picture of my mom."

Steve knew he lived with his step-mom, but had never even thought about what happened to Billy's real mother. He realizes the pendant was probably a locket, the very one that holds the aforementioned picture, and asks "Can I see it?"

It looks like Billy has to think about it, as he keeps twisting the locket between his fingers, before he nods and opens it. Steve leans towards him, putting his hand up under it and holding it in his palm, straining to see the tiny, aged picture.

Even though he's never seen this woman, it makes Steve incredibly sad, seeing her little face all worn out in that locket around her son's neck. He wonders if she was dead, or if maybe she'd lost custody for some reason, or if maybe she had just left, but whatever happened, when his eyes flicker back up to Billy's face, the tears shining in his eyes and the way he avoids his gaze, he knows better than to ask.

Steve lets the locket fall and watches Billy snap it shut quickly, and he realizes he has no idea what the right thing to say is.

What he wants to say is that he's sorry, for him losing his mother and having nothing but one yellowed and tear stained picture to remember her by, but that seems too much like prying, somehow not really appropriate.

Instead, he remembers what Billy said about his dad throwing his stuff out and says, "Your dad must be a real asshole, huh?"

Billy scoffs and blinks away the last of the tears in his eyes. "You've got no idea, Harrington." There's a long awkward pause, until Billy asks, "You know how I'm always coming over here with like, all kinds of shit wrong with me?"

Steve thinks he knows where this was going. "Sure."

Chewing on the corner of his nail, Billy takes a moment to get his thoughts together, his eyes flitting nervously across the room, focusing on pretty much anything but Steve, mostly the picture frame behind him. "I lied. It's not, like, fights or whatever I say. At least not with other kids."

Steve himself was no stranger to conversations like these, he himself had to confess something of a similar calibre to Nancy, when they were still dating, because his father had come home from a business trip pissed off about something, and slapped him across the face just a little too hard. The sturdy silver ring that he wore on his middle finger had split the skin on Steve's cheek, and he couldn't come up with a good enough excuse to cover his tracks.

Admitting to it out loud was one of the hardest things he's ever had to do, so he decides he won't make Billy say it. Maybe they weren't on the best of terms, only here to do homework or whatever, but if he was going to open up about this, he definitely wasn't going to make him experience that same humiliation he had.

"Is it your dad? That does that to you?" Nancy hadn't been kind enough to spare him, forcing him to tell her once that the scar he so proudly sported wasn't actually from a fist fight with Tommy like he said, and he wouldn't do the same to Billy.

In lieu of a response though, Billy sucks in a sharp breath through his



teeth, his hands starting to shake ever so subtly, and Steve knows he's got to keep pressing. "Do you need help? I can call the chief."

"No." Billy shakes his head and makes eye contact with Steve for the first time since he started talking. "Cops only make it worse."

Steve could understand that, had tried once when he was about eight or so, with the assistance of one of the housekeepers, to call the police when his father twisted his arm so far behind his back his shoulder popped out of place, but they wouldn't dare arrest a public figure like his father, especially not for a little corporal punishment. The first thing they'd asked was what Steve had done wrong, not why his father had felt it fitting to beat on his eight year old for a tiny mistake. He never asked for help again.

"Well is there anything I can do?" Despite their differences and the fact that he only called him here to cheat on his homework, he truly did want to help Billy. Something about repeatedly surviving horrific monster attacks made him a lot more protective of those around him, and now that they were over their dumb pissing contest, Billy was included in that too.

"Think you've done enough letting me into your mansion, unless that's not good enough for your hero complex." It was a pathetic jab, there was no bite behind his broken tone, and Steve would almost rather have him at his worst than see him so vulnerable and sad.

Steve says softly, "You know it's not like that, Billy."

"Do I?" Walls had been put up as Billy made his last ditch efforts to protect himself from being weak in front of Steve. "Cause where I'm sitting, it seems like you get off on charity cases like mine. You tryin to swoop in and save me, King Steve? Feed your ego so you can feel like the savior you were always meant to be?"

He was baiting him, trying to pick a fight so he'd push him away, Steve had seen it all before in himself and wouldn't fall for it. "Listen. I just want to help you."

Everything about Billy suddenly seemed to make a whole lot more sense. That whole part animal, tough guy thing was just an act, and

Steve knew because he had done essentially the same thing.

Before Nancy Wheeler had taught him to be better, he and Billy really weren't so different. He'd let high school bullshit bother him, beat up the nerds and fucked all the cheerleaders and mocked anyone lower than him on the social ladder like he was supposed to, but it always made him feel off.

In the end, it had been so easy to get him to the other side, to show him what to do instead, he supposed all he needed was a little push to help him actualize what he already believed.

And then it hits him, in that moment, that *this* was Billy's push in the right direction. That he was Billy's Nancy.

"I don't expect you to tell me everything and I'm not doing this for me, just," It became extremely important to him to not set Billy off, to say just the right thing to keep him on the right track. "my door is always open, Billy."

At first, it seemed to have worked, Billy sat staring at the floor, his lip quivering as he mulled over Steve's words, but, when he stood abruptly and snatched his leather jacket from where it was draped over the back of Steve's desk chair, Steve knows he messed up.

"Where are you going?" He stands up fast enough to give himself a head rush while Billy shrugs his jacket back on and yanks the door open.

"Need a smoke." That's all he gets before the door slammed in his face, and he hears Billy's heavy boots stomping down the stairs and the sound of him slamming his front door.

He waits with bated breath and tears pricking the corners of his eyes for the sound of Billy's car starting and tearing out of his driveway, but it never comes.

Still, he feels immensely guilty and selfish and stupid as all hell for not just biting his tongue. He should've just fought back, argued with him like was expecting him to instead of trying to be comforting like he was his fucking therapist or something.

Because this was Billy fucking Hargrove, stereotypical meat head bully. Why he even felt the need to help him, other than their similar upbringings and coping mechanisms, or the fact that Billy had obviously been reaching out, hoping for someone to care, was beyond him. Or maybe it really wasn't, he knew exactly why, he just felt weak and stupid for trying, and especially so for failing.

Apparently he'd been so caught up in his little pity party that he missed the sound of the door opening back up, and didn't notice Billy had come back until his bedroom door was open.

Steve was so relieved that Billy came back, that he hadn't pushed him too far or fucked everything up, even if he reeked of too strong cigarettes, and growled at him when he came in, "Don't we got fucking work to do, Harrington?"

They don't end up finishing the essay. Steve was hopeless with numbers, and they were too busy goofing off, so the math project didn't get done very quickly. It was okay though, Billy wasn't much help at all when it came to English anyways.

Steve walks him outside when he has to go, beating a curfew of midnight. He stops on the porch, immediately crossing his arms against the frigid cold of the night air. Billy stops too at his car, his fingers through the handle, and turns around, calling across the yard. "Hey Harrington?"

He hardly waits for Steve's response, a quick "Yeah?" to tell him, "Thank you."

There isn't time for Steve to respond before Billy's yanking open the door of his Camaro and backing out of the driveway, but he knows he'd still made astronomical progress tonight.

It makes him feel incredibly dumb, laying in his bed that night, illuminated by the warm light of that very same Bambi lamp and trying to put his thoughts of Billy to rest like he was some cheesy teenage girl, but he's just happy to have found a friend, to have made a difference in somebody's life, and he knows that on the other side of town, laying in own bed with his locket left open on the pillow beside him, Billy feels the same way.

## 17. Day 17- Popsicles

When spring comes around the corner, all of the stores always start selling those red mesh bags full of popsicles again.

Even as a kid Billy would usually turn his nose up at them, he thought they tasted too watered down and way too sugary, and the very thought of cold ice scraping against his teeth just made his skin crawl. Max didn't much like them either, so they never had any around, except for maybe when Susan would buy some for the neighbor kids.

But after Starcourt, Billy is constantly dehydrated, breathing through his mouth to try to bring more oxygen in his body than he could get from the little tubes in his nose, and struggling to drink enough because it would burn in his throat. His doctors say that's not good for someone with as many health problems as he has, his blood pressure, his heart, his everything, so he has to figure something out.

Now after getting out of the hospital, he's *terrified* of his heart giving out, of not doing enough and just letting himself go, because that isn't what he wants. He wants to fight, wants to survive, but he can't even drink water without having a panic attack, his brain tricking him into thinking it's the chemicals again, and he's scared.

Steve is the one who actually suggests the popsicles.

He always did all of the grocery shopping for the both of them, just like he helped pay his hospital bills and put a damn roof over his head and cooked for them and gave Billy his pills, he did everything and more. It mad Billy feel incompetent, because Steve had said since they were together it was half his burden, but then he took on the whole damn thing.

But anyways, while he was out at the store stocking back up, he'd spotted that familiar display of freeze pops by the front of the store, and he had an idea.

Before he was old enough to be left alone, his family used to take him on their trips with them, and he remembers, when he sees the

popsicles in the store that day, buying a bomb pop for a couple of cents at the beach when he started feeling a little dizzy because his mom hadn't brought anything but wine in the cooler.

They're only a dollar, so it's not like he'll be breaking the bank buying something that wasn't on their shopping list, and if it was going to help Billy, he figures anything's worth a shot.

He forgets he even bought them until he's putting everything away in the freezer, and he calls out, "Oh yeah, bought you something Billy."

Billy calls back, his voice all scratchy from raising it, "What is it?"

"Popsicles."

"Popsicles?" Steve hears him stand up, can hear each step he takes towards the kitchen because of the little cart he had to carry the oxygen tank around in squeaking. Billy asks him once he's in the room, "What'd you buy me those for?"

"To see if it would help, since it's not really like a drink, but it's water, kind of." Steve explains, watching Billy's face for a negative reaction, but he's not offended by Steve thinking he could help him (this time), he just shrugs, and says "Sure, I'll try it. Toss me one."

Billy decides that the red ones are gross and that the green ones taste just a little bit too much like chlorine, but in the end they do help him a lot. There's a noticeable improvement in how lethargic he is and in how quickly his strength depletes now that his body isn't running on empty.

Of course, there does come a day when he's able to eat and drink whatever he wants, at least for the most part, and as soon as he can he quits the popsicles, never having quite gotten over hating the taste and the feeling.

But the sentiment was what really did it for him anyways, being able to smile at Steve, once he was able to go out with him even if it was only every once in a while, every time they passed one of those cardboard boxes loaded with the very same popsicles.

To him, it was the fact that there was at least one someone out there who cared enough about him to think of him, and want him to get better. That was the most important thing.

## 18. Day 18- Heatwave

The spring after Billy rolled into town, the Harrington's needed a new lawn boy.

Poor delicate Steve was allergic to grass and couldn't do it himself, his senior was never home long enough to do it, and the guy who used to quit on them, so Billy was able to schmooze Mrs. Ruthie Harrington into fifty bucks an hour every few days to take care of their yard himself.

Any thing he could do to get out of the house was an opportunity worth jumping on, and since they Harrington's have got a pretty decent sized property, he's making at least one hundred bucks every time he mows, even more if he has to tend the flower beds.

That's damn good money for a job he took just to avoid Neil until the pool opened, and there was no way he was going to complain about getting to ogle Steve Harrington through his windows either, so for the first few weeks he's doing this rich family help thing, he's actually enjoying their little set up.

But just a few weeks into the spring, it starts getting hot already.

And Billy, he's more than used to the heat, but this isn't the warmth of the California sun, the dry heat that was comfortable and nice. This is off the charts humidity, the kind of hot that sits heavy on your shoulders and makes you want to just lay down and give up.

The problem is too that to do yard work, he's usually wearing old worn out jeans and a long sleeved denim button down (open of course), staying covered as he was willing out in the sun so he didn't get baked.

Of course he never would've imagined the spring in Hawkins to be hotter than a San Diego summer, especially not after that grueling winter he was just forced to deal with, but there he is, sweating his ass off in Steve's garden on a sunny May morning.

An old rubber band he found in one of the Harrington's sheds serves

as a makeshift hair tie, keeping his curls from sticking to his neck and making him hotter, and his shirt gets tied around his waist instead.

To make things worse, today's a garden day, Ruthie told him some stray cats tore up all her beautiful annuals the beds in the back of the house by the pool by using them as a litter box, and he needed to plant them all new.

Which by itself was fine, he got paid more when he had to do the flowers anyways, but he's not really feeling it, digging in the dirt and planting dozens of hydrangeas when he's already all sweaty because of this stupid unexpected heatwave.

And as if that wasn't bad enough, today's one of the very rare days when Steve comes out to sit pretty in the pool chair, awful close for someone who's supposed to be allergic to the flowers he's planting, sipping on a lemonade and just watching.

"What do you want, Harrington?"

"My mom's paying you a lot of money for those hydrangeas, Hargrove. I've got to make sure you do it right."

Billy rolls his eyes and tries to pretend Steve's not there, his eyes feeling like daggers in his back. As he plants the last of the flowers, rubbing dirt all over his jeans from his hands, Steve clicks his tongue, and says "Maybe you should've laid down some new soil."

Through gritted teeth he asks, "Why's that?"

"I just figure that way it'll be harder for the cats to dig them up."

"You couldn't have said that *before* I planted all those little fuckers."

"Just thought of it." Steve says matter-of-factly, and eyes him up, like he's anticipating something, "Now are you going to do it or what?"

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you just like watching me work. Or am I right about that?"

"What I like is for my garden not to be destroyed because of an incompetent lawn boy."



“Then you would’ve done it yourself.”

“Can’t, I’m allergic.”

“I don’t think so. You’re allergic to tulips and grass, maybe some weeds here and there, I’ve seen you sniffing inside when I mow.”

“Creep.” Steve mutters and rolls his eyes, but Billy ignores him to keep on with his point, “You wouldn’t be out here if yo were allergic. I think you’re just paying me for the show at this point.”

“Yeah and so what if I am, huh?”

“I just would’ve liked to know, so I could do this sooner.”

“Do wha-“ Billy kisses him before he can keep arguing with him, keeping his dirt covered hands hovering just away from touching his face.

Steve breaks it first, smiling like something was funny, and reaches out to wipe a smudge of dirt off of his cheek with his thumb, and offers, “You’re super gross, do you want a shower before you head back home?”

Billy smirks back at his pretty boy, lowering his voice to suggest, “Only if you lead the way.”

## 19. Day 19- Vines

Romance was never really a Billy Hargrove thing.

He's just not a flowers kind of guy, and he doesn't do sweet nothings or buy his sweetie chocolates before a date. Hell, he doesn't even think he's ever technically been on a real date.

For Steve, he can make the occasional exception, like bringing him his coffee in bed the morning after or throwing rocks at his window during the early hours of the morning, but for a *long* time they're still in this sort of, undefined stage.

Billy's alright with that entirely, because that just means he doesn't have to worry about all the gooey romance stuff, but when Steve, who very much is a romantic, decides to put a label to this thing they're doing, telling Billy he loves him and giving him some promise ring to wear for when they go off to college, he knows he wants to put in a little more work into this whole romance thing than just some cologne down his pants and his most charming smile.

So on the days when he can get away from Neil for long enough, Billy will take Steve on little dates to get midnight milkshakes at the diner or on long car rides into the city instead of just out to the quarry to end up in the backseat, but those hardly count as real romantic gestures.

It's not that he doesn't *want* to do nice things for Steve, it's rather the opposite, he just isn't sure what exactly he's doing here. What he has with Steve is a first for everything, well not *really*, but it's the first he'd ever meant it, and he wants to do it right.

Their six months is in May, and Billy really wants to do something for it, to prove he's as much into this as Steve is. He asks Max what is customary to do for an anniversary, and she tells him all kinds of things that'd have them dead in five minutes if they tried it, so she tries Susan, and she tells him all the same things, movie dates and candle lit dinners and meeting the parents (seriously Sus?).

He turns to Heather next, his last resort on all things dating advice,

and she hits the mark a little closer, throwing things out there like going to a show in the city or smoking behind the dumpsters at Benny's, but that one suggestion that really stands out to him is the vineyard.

That seems like the perfect mix of romantic, but not so romantic as to get themselves caught, and it seems very aligned with his boyfriends rich boy tastes anyways, so it just seems like the perfect idea.

There's one on the outskirts of Hawkins where it merges into Amish country, so that's where he takes Steve, surprising him with the trip up a few days before the actual date.

To Billy, it's very underwhelming, a little boring even, since the woman in charge doesn't buy their IDs and makes them take the dry tour, but Steve seems to be into it. Billy can't even imagine how many things like this he'd been dragged along to as a kid.

They're walking through rows of grapevine, Billy touching all the grapes like he's not supposed to, Steve rolling his eyes at him for being such a kid, when Steve tells him, "You know we used to have grapevines in our backyard?"

"Nope. Why don'tcha anymore?"

"My mom told the gardener to cut them out because I'm allergic to grapes." Steve says simply with a shrug, but Billy stops walking, "What?"

"Yeah, my dad showed me you could chew on grapevine and I did, but then my face got all itchy." He eyes what must be a look of shock on Billy's face, and asks, "I never told you that?"

"Do you really think I would've brought you here, where there are *thousands* of the little fuckers, if I knew that?"

"Well you took me to a flower field once, and I'm allergic to pollen."

"I didn't know that either!" Billy sighs, exasperated, "Stevie you have got to start telling me this stuff."

"It's really not a big deal."

“It is though. Did this for the big day.”

Steve’s eyes widen, “You did? Billy, you didn’t have to do anything for me.”

“But I *did* . You’re always putting in so much effort and I’m just- I’m *really* bad at this, Steve.” He sighs, pulls a grape off its stem so he doesn’t have to look at him as he admits, “Need you to know how much you mean to me.”

“Hey, you say you love me, so I believe you. You don’t have to prove yourself to me, Bills.”

“You couldn’t have told me that *before* I brought you here.”

“Didn't know I needed to.” Steve gives him *that* look, the one that tells him there are better things to be doing right now than listening to old ladies droning on about wine, “Now what do you say we go home, and you can open my present early?”

And he knows he means it then, that he doesn’t hold him to all these fancy expectations like Billy’s been doing backflips to meet. Steve wants Billy, the *real* him, and quite frankly, he’s more than willing to give it to him.

## 20. Day 20- Breeze

They say the quarry is the place where all the kids like Billy go to die, the fuck ups and the failures, the lonely and broken ones.

His momma always told him he was special, but he knows now that that's not true. He's just another fucked up kid who can't take the hand he's been dealt, a punching bag for his father, a bully to everyone else, and he knows too that he was never really meant to be anything more than that.

When the breeze blows in off the water below him, it makes him shiver, feels under his skin like it rattles through him, the hollow shell of who he's supposed to be.

Because if he isn't who they tell him he has to be, isn't that angry boy his peers see, or the scared one his father knows he is, who is he?

He's nobody is who he is. Just an empty and pathetic nobody.

Billy closes his eyes, pretends that that cool breeze is coming off of the ocean instead of the churning water so many feet below him, imagines hot sand under his feet instead of his beat up old chucks dangling over the edge. He tries to pretend that he's that kid again, the one who didn't have to worry about life and the plans he made for it that would never work out.

It doesn't work, there's no escaping the pitch dark hole looming over him that's swallowing up everything that he is, not when he can still feel the jagged rocks in his palms, the burn of cigarette smoke in his lungs, the bruises under his shirt and the cold air that feels nothing like home.

He thinks that that boy would be so disappointed in him.

He used to have dreams. He wanted to be a doctor, a superhero, a football player. But now he was here, considering a drop he'd never survive, and those dreams were teetering on the edge with him.

Still, didn't he owe it to the kid he used to be to make something of

himself? Didn't he owe it to himself to try, and not to jump?

There was a point in time when he would've said yes, absolutely he did, but he wasn't so sure anymore.

He's been doing this for so long now, it feels like it wouldn't even matter. Like if he were to just let it happen right now, it wouldn't make a difference at all, be it to the world or to that goddamned little boy. Would anyone even notice?

Well of course they would, Neil would notice when he ran out of beer and didn't have anyone to bring him another, Susan would notice when there were no blood stains to scrub out of the carpet, Tommy would notice when he had nobody to bum a ride off of after a party he didn't even care if Billy was enjoying (he wouldn't be), but would they care?

Max would. When he wasn't by her side at her graduation or her wedding, missing from every major milestone along the way, she would care. God did he want to be there for her, his little sister.

Steve would too. There was no doubt in his mind about that. He was the boy who said he loved him, and looked past all the things that brought Billy to this very cliff. He'd wake up alone, and have to do all the things they swore on the ring hanging from his necklace they'd do together. Would he do all those things with someone else, or not at all?

Another chill runs up his spine, and he backs away from the edge, like he just realized where he was, which some part of him maybe had, scrambling to get away from it.

That cold, gentle breeze bringing him to his senses is what does it, like a reminder from above that it wasn't his time, and that he would be missed by at least one someone, were he to let go too soon. That is what gives him the will to fight this, this hopelessness and come out on the other side. To live another day.

He cries, broken sobs and hiccups echoing through the night air, off of the quarry walls down to the water that almost took him, his life reflecting off of inevitable death. Today was not his day.

He goes home that night and gets in trouble for staying out late, and it hurts and it's not fair, but he's *alive*. The taste of copper in his mouth, the sting of an open palm against his skin is the unfortunate proof of that, but either way, he is *here*, and he has every reason to be.

He hugs Max extra tight that night, and she doesn't shove him away. She stands on her tip toes and tells him she's sorry for what happened with Neil, as if he hadn't almost left her with him. If she had noticed the tears in his eyes when they pulled away, she doesn't say anything.

The next morning he calls Steve and tells him he's sorry, even though Steve doesn't know about what he almost did. He apologizes and tells him he wants to see him again, lets himself get hysterical because he almost never heard the sound of that voice again. And Steve, he doesn't freak out on him, or tell him he's insane, he lets him talk about it, listens and understands and feels for him.

And that, that is exactly why he didn't do it.

Because he's *not* empty, or useless, and he's not just another fuck-up. He is a brother, a boyfriend, and a human being who deserves a goddamned chance at life.

The quarry is a place where many misguided souls had gone to die, and his heart goes out to them, he more than anybody could understand that pain, but Billy did not join them, and every single day that passed, every mile stone of life that he accomplishes, he's grateful to have made that choice.

To have made the decision to just try a little longer, and open the door to a life of love and happiness, and so much more than what he could see from the edge of that cliff.

## 21. Day 21- Fire

Billy is afraid of fire. He's unashamed to admit it, that little kick in his heart every time he lights up a cigarette, checking that it's extinguished completely in the ash tray and won't catch anything, or the anxiety that hits when they start using the fireplace every winter.

He doesn't get what's so nice about it that people want it in their homes, the smoke that clings to your hair and your clothes, the heat that makes you feel hot and itchy underneath your skin. The way that the burning light digs into the recesses of his mind and brings forward terrible memories.

The first time his dad ever put out a cigarette on his wrist, held a lighter to delicate skin to see how long it would take before he pulled away, or pressed his small hand against the stove burner as punishment, Billy was only seven years old.

After his mom left when he was eleven, Neil burned all of his mother's things, pictures, clothes, documents, and dragged him outside kicking and screaming to watch the destruction of every last memory he held of his mother, forcing him to stay with a heavy boot on his back.

At fourteen, he went to a bonfire party on a beach a few towns over. The invite came from some older kids who made him drink way too much, the burn of the fire was felt too in his first time drinking whiskey, among other things that happened that night that never should have.

Just last year, a monster in control of his own body made him burn, the sun, the sauna, the Camaro in flames, a constant searing pain like heat tearing through muscle under his skin.

He knows Max means well when she invites him along to one of the get togethers they do every few months or so when Mrs. Byers and her kids drop back in for a visit, this one hosted in Claudia Henderson's backyard, and being just a couple of months out of the hospital, it doesn't seem like so bad an idea to reintroduce himself into social situations that way.



But it's the summer time again, and hicks like to burn things in the summer. He doesn't even know who suggests it, just that they're moving lawn chairs around a fire pit he'd been deliberately avoiding, and that with the first coil of smoke from a match tossed into a pile of dryer lint and cardboard boxes, he already feels himself starting to panic.

There's nothing he can do but just stand and watch the flames, ignoring the horrible burning in his already weak lungs, the unpleasant head from standing too close, all of those sensories that take him right back to those places.

Max doesn't notice anything's wrong until there's tears on his cheeks, and she might be the same clueless kid she always was, but she genuinely seems to want to help him these days. She tells him to go inside, that Mrs. Henderson won't mind it if he needs to calm down in her living room, and really, he doesn't have it in him to fight it or see any reason to.

But when he steps into the house, instantly overwhelmed by how stuffy and cluttered it is in the tiny one story, he's not the only one avoiding the party, because laying on the floor all cuddled up to Tews is Steve.

Billy snorts, asks him, "What are you doing in here?"

"Strong smells give me headaches." Steve answers simply, still paying most of his attention to the all sprawled out on the floor beside him, but apparently noticing how wiggled out Billy looks, because he asks him, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. 'M fine." Billy dismisses him, but it's apparently not convincing enough, because Steve is asking, "You sure? You're looking a little.. rough."

Billy rolls his eyes, "Thanks."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I know you didn't."

Things feel awkward, in the months since they'd seen each other,

they're definitely not as close as they used to be. Steve must feel it too, the tension between them, because he's saying, "Listen, you can talk to me, Billy. I mean, I know we haven't been as close after everything that happened, but you're still my friend."

And that, that little declaration is jarring to Billy, because a friend wouldn't almost get fired for missing too much work just to come see him in the hospital, or promise to always be by his side, and friends sure as all hell don't kiss friends knuckles while they're in a coma. "Do you really still see me as a friend?"

"Of course I do. You're my very best friend." Steve assures, missing the point enough that Billy feels the need to clarify, "Even after everything that was said and done?"

"I've told you before, what happened wasn't your fault."

"Wait, I think we're talking about two different things."

"Oh." A look of realization crosses his face after a moment of thinking, and he says, looking a bit flustered, " *Oh* . I-I didn't know you were awake for all of that."

"I wasn't, Max is just a little snitch." He adds, just to make sure they were finally on the same page, "You know I've been waitin' for you to make your move?"

"Is it too late to do it now?"

"Not if you do it right."

Steve kisses him, far more gentle and sweet than he thought anything like that could be, which is to say, *definitely* the right way, and it feels like the smoke clears from his lungs.

Feels like the flame that was eating away at him, slowly destroying his foundations and waiting for the day he crumbled had been smothered, and from within the ashes came the gentle glow of passion, and love, and everything that he needed most.

Those memories couldn't be controlled, but much like the fire, they could be put out, and Billy, well he could finally be unafraid.

## 22. Day 22- Yellow

Maria Hargrove drove a yellow '74 Karmann Ghia.

That was the car little Billy always dreamed about seeing in his driveway or waiting for him outside of school instead of Neil's banged up old truck. The one he watched for when he was out or from the front bay window every single day after that fateful night when she left him, but she never came back.

Eight years, 2,000 miles, and a horrific accident later, Billy was in the hospital, still healing from dozens of invasive surgeries, long past those days waiting for his momma, but one day, his wish is granted, and there's a canary yellow car in the visitors lot at Hawkins General.

Steve was supposed to be bringing the kids for a visit, El wanted to see Billy before she left Hawkins again, and everyone else decided to come with her, but he freezes up when he sees the car, the one he'd heard about in the stories Billy told him when he was still too out of it to remember his own name, but had a perfect memory for things like his first dog's name, and the model of his mother's car.

The odds that someone in Hawkins had that exact same exact car in such an obnoxious color with California license plates are next to none, and Steve thinks he knows what that means.

Max must notice it too, because she steps up beside him and asks, her eyes wide, "Is that..?"

"Yeah." He answers quickly, and hands Max his wallet, shooing her off with the order to, "Take the rest of the brats to the gift shop or something, I'll come get you when he's ready."

The walk to Billy's room in the second floor B wing had never felt longer, hurrying through winding corridors to try to see if his hunch was correct. He gets there just in time to see that it absolutely was.

Maria is in the hallway outside of Billy's room, her head down and her hair frazzled, like she'd been running her fingers nervously

through it in the same way Billy did. She looks just like her photo, a little older and more grey, but it's jarring, seeing her here in Hawkins.

As he approaches, Steve's expecting her to introduce herself, or to go in the room with him, anything really other than what actually happens, which is her looking up with tears in her eyes, and storming off down the hall.

"You'll never guess who I just saw." Steve announces as he enters Billy's room, but sees that Billy's laying back in his bed with the heels of his hands pressed into his eyes, his nose and his cheeks, which are normally so pale these days, flushed bright red from crying, and he knows that their reunion already happened, and it wasn't a happy one. "What happened?"

Billy shakes his head, answers with a broken, "Nothing." which Steve knows to be very much not true, so he sits with him, taking up his hand and telling him softly, "I know that look by now, Billy. You're hurting, but you can talk to me."

"Just- When momma was here she said we should move past everything that happened so we could be happy again, but I just- I couldn't." Billy explains, his voice cracking and sounding more and more defeated as he talks, "The first time I see her in eight goddamned years and she doesn't even say she's sorry, o-or that she missed me. She just wants me to forget."

Steve nods, trying to be understanding, and brings up what he knows had always made Billy the angriest about the situation with his mom, to see if he at least got closure there, "Did she at least acknowledge Neil?"

"No, that's exactly the problem! She wants to take me back home with her and run away from all my problems, all my friends. It's probably just to pay her debts with the government money that's about to start rolling in once I get out of here, so I told her no. Told her I-I'm not like her." Billy sighs, and leans against Steve, more tears welling up in his eyes as he asks, "Does that make me the asshole?"

"No, Billy, of course it doesn't. She left *you*, you don't owe it to her to

just forgive her the minute she comes back.”

“I feel like the asshole though. I mean, how could I turn her away? That’s my *momma* out there.”

“Your *momma* who abandoned you with your abusive father.”

“Yeah I know that, but I -I used to pray for her to come back to get me and now that she did I just-” Billy’s words are cut off with a sob, and Steve pulls him closer, rubbing his back as best he can with the brace that keeps his ribs from collapsing on him.

“Hey, listen to me. You said it yourself, B. She just wanted to use you. She would’ve came back for you sooner if there was any other reason.”

“But how do I know that for sure? What if- What if she really wanted me back?”

“You never really know for sure, but Billy it’s not worth stretching yourself thin for someone who never put in the effort for you. You’re still healing, you can’t just uproot your life to please her.”

Billy doesn’t argue, so Steve takes that as his invitation to keep talking, gently explaining, “And anyways, you have a family here now. We love you, *I* love you, Billy. That’s worth more than what she was willing to offer you.”

Billy bites his lip, no doubt holding back more tears as he considers whether he believes Steve or not, ultimately answering with a watery, “Okay. M’sorry, Stevie.”

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for, baby.” Steve kisses Billy softly, cupping his cheeks and wiping away tears from his eyes, jumping when the door slams open and the kids come in. “What did I tell you little shits? I was going to come get you eventually.”

Dustin shrugs his shoulders, and says simply, “We got bored.”

“Yeah, and Max told us about Billy’s mom being here and we wanted to meet her.” Lucas says.

But Max looks between Billy and Steve's faces, the emotion that must be written there, and asks, her cheeks tinging pink and her tone wobbling with anger, "Where is she?"

Despite the heartbreak, the barely faded tear tracks still on his cheeks, and the way his hands shake, on the side of being barely noticeable, Billy swallows it all down and tells her simply, communicating to her in that secret way they had that she didn't need to be upset for him, "She left."

On their way out that night, the yellow car is long gone. If what she truly wanted was for Billy to come with her, she would've understood his pain and fought for him regardless, not just fled.

Max asks Steve before they leave, "Do you think he'll be alright after that?"

He nods, thinking about the look on Billy's face when the kids came in the room, about the family they had now and how far he'd already come, and he tells, "I do. I really, really do."

## 23. Day 23- Picnic

Billie's used to seeing Steph in the kinds of fancy clothes she wasn't even allowed to touch on the rack, but this, this is on a whole other level.

She showed up at her door, unannounced like usual, but when Steph answers, she's dressed like a full on southern belle, a lacy floral dress down to her ankles, heavy makeup like she almost never wore, her brown hair all done up and wearing a little sun hat with a ribbon. Billie was willing to bet she probably even had a matching lace parasol somewhere.

"Oh honey, *what* are you wearing?" She snickers, not even trying to hide her amusement at the ridiculous ensemble.

"Shut up." Steph snaps, blushing, though it goes mostly unnoticed under all that rouge, and steps aside to let Billie in, white kitten heels clicking against the hardwood floors.

"Are you wearing bloomers under there?" She grabs one of the many layers of dress and lifts it, getting her hand swatted away and scolded, "Billie!"

She holds her hands up, got caught red handed, and Steph rolls her eyes, explaining her ridiculous ensemble, "Ruthie's making me go to one of her stupid mother-daughter bonding things. We're going on a picnic once she gets dressed." She adds under her breath, like she'd already been waiting for a while, "Which knowing her will be another few hours at least."

"So she made you put on your nicest princess dress just for what? To go sit in the dirt and eat cucumber sandwiches?" Billie teases, slightly surprised when Steph agrees with her, ranting, "Exactly! I've been complaining about it for *years* but it's always the same, Stephanie listen to your mother, Stephanie do what I tell you, Stephanie, Stephanie, Stephanie."

Maybe a little more aggressive than is necessary, egged on by how upset her girlfriend was when she was normally the one who didn't

complain, Billy remarks, “How about, Stephanie wake the hell up and realize you don’t owe it to your mommy to play dress up with her just so she feels like she’s a good mother?”

“That’s a bit harsh.” Steph tells her, defensive and a little taken aback.

“Why do you think she even does these things, Steph? It’s sure as all hell not because she wants to spend time with you.” Her tone shifts very quickly from teasing and comical to serious, defensive even, and it makes Steph feel like she did something wrong. “She thinks it makes up for it if she comes around once every few months. Even then she’s still forcing you to be this perfect daughter.”

It’s not like she doesn’t see where her girlfriend is coming from, but that’s her mom, she’s not just going to let Billie say all that stuff about her. “That’s not even fair, Billie. My mom’s not like, evil or something just because she doesn’t get me.”

“Baby you’ve got to see the pattern here. She doesn’t get you because she doesn’t even *know* you.”

“It is *just* a picnic, Billie. That’s not- That’s not some horrible, manipulative master plan made up by my abusive mother or something.”

“I *know* that, sweetheart. But you can’t keep making excuses for her just because she takes two seconds out of her ‘busy’ day to make you do something you don’t even want to.” Steph realizes then that Billie doesn’t give two shits about Ruthie, that this is about *her*, and her girlfriend would be doing the same thing no matter who it was that had made her upset.

Steph is still processing that when Billie softens up a bit, maybe sensing that she’s been figured out and telling her gently, “Look, if you actually want to go to this thing, then go, by all means please do, but you have to quit justifying your decision. And you gotta promise you won’t just be doing it for her either.”

“I wouldn’t be. I promise.” Steph assures her, taking up her hand and asking Billie sweetly, “Could you come with me though?”



“Course I will, but if you think you’re dressing me up like that-“ She motions to Steph’s outfit, “then you’ve got another thing coming, baby girl.”

“Why not? *I* have to do it.” But Billie firmly denies her again, so Steph decides to sweeten her offer, “You wouldn’t seriously deny your girlfriend the chance to see your tits in a bustier, would you?”

Billie makes a face like she’s thinking, and that wide toothy smile appears on her face again as she agrees, “Only if after we get back, you make sure I’m wearing nothing but?”

Steph agrees, dragging Billie up the steps to get dressed, ”Deal.”

## 24. Day 24- Afterlife

Neon lights, broken glass, a monster screech, searing pain, relief. Billy looks down in just enough time to see the monster pull back from where it had impaled him, the ground rushing towards his face.

There was no moment where his life flashed before his like everyone in the movies talked about, all he saw was Max. He couldn't hear her, he could just feel himself dying, tasting blood in his mouth as he tried to form an apology.

For everything he'd done, by his own accord and by the monsters, for everything he hadn't done and would never be able to do. He was sorry not only to Max, but to all of her friends and to his own, but mostly to himself.

It was a terrible way to die, but at least it was quick, he thinks. He was never supposed to get a happy ending anyways. You sin, you repent. You don't repent, you go to hell, and well, Billy never knew how exactly he was supposed to earn forgiveness when his sin was being himself, simply existing, so.

Still, he tried to make sure things would be different. He went to every service, prayed every night like a good Christian was supposed to and tried to make up for being the way he was, but those things just felt just like a performance. Especially now that he was dying, he knows all of that was just futile attempts at pleasing the man upstairs that had gotten him nowhere near any closer to the pearly gates.

He's terrified, but he thinks he deserves what's coming all the same. As much as he'd like to see a familiar face once he goes, he knows he doesn't have a place in paradise.

Honestly he doesn't think he minds it so much, where he goes after it happens; he just wants to be away from all the suffering.

Not just the pain, but everything that had led up to it, what he'd seen and done, he deserved this fate. He *should* repent for those he'd hurt, those he'd killed.

He just feels bad he won't get to spend all of eternity with those he cares about, watching from down below as Max exchanges her ticket with the angels. Maybe Steve at least would end up with him too, since he was a sinner all the same, at least in the dark of the night, every third night out at the quarry, but he feels like shit for even thinking that.

But, as the mall blurs to nothingness around him, just before the unseen forces could fulfill those worries and wishes, Billy wakes up.

His alarm clock goes off on the bedside table, and he startles so badly he falls out of his bed.

Frantically he searches for the gaping hole in his chest, the bleeding bite marks all along his sides, but they come back with nothing. He lets his head fall back and hit the floor, and laughs, exasperated. It had all been a dream.

He picks himself up off the floor, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and he freezes. Minutes pass as he stares at his reflection, creeping sense of dread like something was missing sending a chill up his spine.

He could imagine the blood all down his torso, the monster that had impaled him looming behind him in his reflection. His mirror image moving just a little bit in a way he hadn't, blinking too many times, a twitch at the corner of his lip he didn't feel.

Memories come rushing back, shattering glass and tires squealing, broken ribs and chemical burns, red hot heat, gun fire, fireworks, his blood on the tiles, agony like he'd never felt before. He wasn't the most responsible when it came to what he put in his body, but no amount of the cheap drugs he could find at parties could make him feel all of *that* .

It hadn't been a dream. He had lived through all of that and he *died* .

Now he was in his room, and according to his calendar it was the 27th of June, two days before he was, or would be, possessed by the shadow. He had to get to the bottom of this. Fast.

## 25. Day 25- Lake

Steve Harrington is no stranger to grieving.

Before, when it was for a family member he'd hardly ever met, or a pet lost to age, he would've likened the feeling to a storm cloud, looming and heavy, but still far away, not really inescapable. He could always just put up his umbrella and stay out of the downpour for a while.

But after Billy dies, it's not that same temporary wetness on his skin; this is like sinking to the bottom of a pitch dark lake. Violently churning water that clouded his vision and filled his lungs, a force which he was all but helpless against.

The funeral, Billy's things being sold and destroyed, anniversaries and holidays. Everything that reminded Steve of Billy was like another anchor keeping him at the bottom of that deep lake of swirling black grief, until it seemed hopeless that he'd ever escaped. Seemed like he'd drown, and never see the light again.

It's lonely at the bottom. The kids don't ask him for rides, and lord knows his parents aren't looking for him. Even Robin stops calling after a while.

The worst part is that he can see them, their rippled reflections as they stare down into the blackness, unable to see him there. He tries to get them to notice him, shaking his chains and screaming so bubbles rise to the surface, but they never see him. Never help him.

Days and months and years go by stuck under the surface, and he still misses Billy. He still loves him too, he could spend the rest of his life at the bottom of the lake and that wouldn't change, but he missed being able to see more of the world than what was going on in the small space he could see him, being able to breathe and feel and *live* for himself again.

Under the shroud of his grief, he lost himself, for a long time he didn't know who he was, only who he wasn't. Who he couldn't be.

But what he does know is that isn't what Billy would've wanted for him, to be trapped and drowning in his sorrow, missing out on the life they had planned to share.

It takes courage, it takes bravery he isn't sure he has and a lot of strength, but for his Billy, Steve decides he's going to learn how to swim.

## 26. Day 26- Easy

Nobody ever said it was going to be easy.

Actually they told him expressly that it wouldn't be. They explained it all in the hospital, he'd never get off the tank as long as he lived, or get his energy or all of his memories or his muscle mass back, and he'd be lucky if he ever grew out of needing braces to keep his chest together.

Still, they never really mentioned anything about emergency surgeries because another hole opened in his heart or almost bleeding out because he was on blood thinners, or that he'd have flare ups of pain so severe he was left bedridden for days.

When he signed the discharge papers and came back home with Max, he had really thought it was over, that he'd just rest for a little while longer and he'd be back to himself. But he's not. He's weak and he's hurting and he's sick all the damn time, so distinctly not himself it's disorienting.

So he holes himself up in his bedroom, hiding from the truth, and in part from what's on the other side of the door. He locks himself in and pretends things aren't really the way they are.

Max tries to get him off his ass every now and again, but she doesn't really get it, how bad things are inside of Billy's body. The way she saw it, her brother had survived by some miracle, but now, even after a whole year had passed, he still wasn't getting better.

She doesn't mean to be mean, he knows that, but she regurgitates what Neil says about him, calls him lazy and selfish and ungrateful for not participating in his second chance at life.

Billy blames himself for that. Shutting her out was bound to make her turn to her family for answers they wouldn't give without bias, making her believe those things to be true while he was barely scraping by in isolation, but it stings all the same.

Not that the things Max said about him were anything new. He knew

when he stopped being able to walk for a few minutes without getting winded that he was lazy, knew when Max knocked on his door and he made up excuses not to open it and let her in he was being selfish, and he knew when the days just kept flying by and he wasn't showing a single sign of improvement that he was wasting his life away.

In August of '87, Billy decides he's fed up with it.

He goes on their stupid family vacation like he'd missed out on the last few years, going to some amusement park in PA.

It doesn't go too swell, he coughs up blood in the bathroom and he doesn't ride anything because of his heart, and he's sweating like crazy in the late summer heat, his body so weak he's having to take constant breaks- but Max smiles so wide at him, and even though he looks like hell in all the pictures they take, feels even worse, his little sister is beaming.

So he does it again. He starts going out with her to do anything, the movies, shopping, the park, willing to put aside his own well being just to see her happy again. She had almost lost him, he owed it to her to be there now.

But they say all good things must come to an end, and this is no exception. His third month into this, this forcing himself out of the house and pretending he doesn't throw up the second they get back home or that he didn't have to tighten his brace every other day because it feels like his back is going to crack in two, Billy gets caught.

It's a lot harder to hide your pain from a group of almost a dozen instead of just one little sister over her head in excitement that her brother hadn't died, and they sniff him out like a herd of hungry sharks.

One of Max's little nerd friends wants to go to a parade, which sounds like it's going to be okay, but apparently Hawkins is big on their Memorial Day parades, and they have to walk quite a bit to get

to what the brats considered to be a good spot.

And apparently kids these days pregame parades, showing at least an hour early just to sit in the beating down sun, in a large crowd of people, sitting on the curb. It shouldn't take a genius to realize that's not really Billy's scene, and quite frankly, it doesn't.

Because it's Steve who pulls him aside (into the shade, thank heavens) and asks him, genuine concern on his face, "Are you alright, Billy?"

And like, he's not, but Max looks over, frowning when she notices he isn't there, and it's for her that he's even doing this, so he lies through his teeth, "Alright as I'll ever be." But that doesn't sound as convincing as he means for it to. Sounds more like his worst nightmare.

Steve doesn't even say anything else to him, just gives a little heads up to the kids "Me and Billy are going back to my car. I forgot something and he volunteered to come with so I didn't get lost on the way back."

A chorus of uninterested okays and a fleeting moment of eye contact with Max, and Billy's being dragged along, literally dragged, his legs feeling too heavy to put much effort into walking, back to the BMW a few streets away.

It's not like he didn't notice that the heat was bothering him, but he didn't really think about how bad it was until he was in the air conditioned back seat of Steve's car, his hair pulled up with a random scrunchie one of the girls must have left in the backseat.

Steve in the front seat tosses him back a water bottle he must've bought on the way back, and looks at him expectantly. "So? You gonna tell me what happened out there?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary." Billy shrugs, trying to blow him off, but maybe his word choice could've been better, because then Steve's asking him, concerned, "Does this happen a lot?"

There's no hiding it, so he agrees, "Pretty much, yeah."



“Dude, that’s not- you’re going to-“ Steve starts, but gets cut off when Billy says, frustrated before this conversation had really even begun, having had it dozens of times with himself as he tried and failed to get out of bed, “I’m going to what, Harrington? I’m going to get myself killed. Going to let everybody down because there was just one more thing Billy Hargrove couldn’t do?”

“Actually, that’s exactly what I was going to say. I mean, who gives a shit about everybody, but what about Max? Don’t you want to do it for her?”

“Why do you think I’m here?”

“Pretty sure the last thing Max wants is for you to get any sicker. She wants her brother to be around for longer.”

“Yeah, well there’s not much of me left is there?” Billy switches the subject, cornered by Steve’s unexpected confrontation, “Fucking- You don’t even know me man, why are you being all preachy?”

“Because I saw the look on Max’s face when you hit the floor, and every day after that for sixth months when you still wouldn’t wake up, and I saw it when you started pushing her away.” Steve says seriously, his voice stern, like he was talking to one of the little brats instead of one of his peers, one of his friends, “Billy you have to at least try.”

“It’s not that fucking easy!” Billy snaps back, “You don’t think I’ve tried to get better? Think I haven’t tried to be who everyone thinks I can be?”

“I’m not saying that it is easy! I’m just saying you need to let yourself heal more. You’re not going to be better overnight and nobody expects that from you.” Steve softens up a bit, to offer, “These kids might not really get it but I’m trying to. Let me understand you. Let me help you.”

And that, that’s the realest anyone has been with Billy since all this shit went down. How’s he supposed to keep his tough guy shit up either? He can’t, so he admits, “I just feel like I have to do everything, you know. I’m not supposed to still be weak. I want to be

again, you know?"

"I don't, and I'm not going to pretend I do, but, but I do know that what you need to do is just take it easy, Billy. You've got time now." Maybe without thinking too much about it, or thinking about it lots, he reaches into the backseat and puts his hand on Billy's knee, "One day you'll be better enough to do whatever you want, but for now you've just gotta take your time."

Time. What a strange concept for somebody like Billy.

Every moment he spent recovering in his bed, he felt like it was wasted, never did he see it as a chance to do more later. Never would he have thought that Steve would be the one giving him advice about it either, and here they were.

But for now, maybe Billy would take it a little easier, even if Max would be a little disappointed. She would understand, and that was what was most important. He still had lots of things he wanted to do, things he would start that very day, when he leaned forward into the front seat, and kissed Steve Harrington.

## 27. Day 27 - Growth

In mid June, Hawkins always has their tacky little town fair, and just like every year, Steve's mother drags him along with her to the rose show.

For the first time in probably twenty years there's new competition against Ruthie's red roses, trimmed during their prime and kept preserved for months until the show so she'd walk away with that commemorative ribbon and plate they handed out to the winner.

Susan Hargrove enters two roses, one red and one pink, which, Ruth laughs at the out of place woman for entering, but she wins with them, steals the award right out from under Mrs. Harrington. That's going to be the talk of the town until next year at least, when Susan and Ruthie would show off again.

She leaves the place as pink in the face as the roses, absolutely miffed that some new in town witch, her words, not Steve's, could steal her title. And well, Steve *tries* not to be too smug about it, but there's something especially satisfying about seeing his mother finally be knocked down a few pegs by a lower class stranger.

The riff raff that attended the fair were the type Ruthie would on a typical day completely refuse to affiliate herself with, so she leaves, but Steve decides he wants to stay, relive some nostalgia for a night.

Over the years he had to admit the small celebration had really started to lose its luster, but maybe some of that former glory is restored when he bumps into Billy behind the food trucks, a stuffed prize sitting on the ground between his knees, smoking on a crumbling old curb.

He flicks away the cigarette and pats the wall beside him for Steve to sit, saying to him, "Hope you don't hate me too much for this." He holds up the golden ribbon in his palm, laughs when Steve shows him the dark blue runner's up.

Steve shakes his head, "Dude, it's a stupid rose show. I have better things to hate you for."

"Aww but you don't hate me." Billy teases, and without a hint of playfulness, Steve agrees, "I don't."

He then adds, "I do gotta know though, does Susan grow her own roses?"

Billy snorts, "Does Ruthie?"

"What do you think?" Ruth didn't do anything for herself, everybody knew that, that was what she was known for. John was the hard worker, Ruthie was the diva, and Steve was their biggest disappointment. The perfect little family. "Did she buy 'em though, Sus?"

"Nah, she roped me into growing 'em for her. The bush was already there, I just like, pruned them and shit. Got five bucks for doing yard work." He admits casually, but Steve is shocked, and he makes it known, "No way. *You* grew the roses that dethroned Ruth Harrington?"

"Well it's not that hard." He chuckles, explaining when Steve scrunches up his nose, "I'm sorry Stevie, but your mother's roses aren't special. I can tell they're frozen. It's better to just take good care of 'em and pluck 'em the day of."

"Hey! Freezing them was my idea!" Steve says defensive, blushing just a little when Billy laughs harder and says, "Don't tell me those were *your* flowers, Steve."

"It's not *my* fault they turn out so bad. The gardener was fired years ago, and my mom's almost never home, so I'm stuck with taking care of them." The flush on his face spreads the longer Billy pokes fun at him, and he says, defensively, "Well why don't you teach me then, since you know so much about it."

Billy freezes, his sense of humor interrupted, but not that smile, never around Steve could you wipe that stupid looking grin off his face as he says, "You saying you wanna grow a garden together with me?"

"You bet I am." Steve says stubbornly, so he'd know the implication wasn't lost on him.

Billy hums, a twinkle of something like a combination of amusement and fondness in his eyes, "Seems a little domestic. At *least* take me on a date first."

Steve looks around them, to the lights, the smells and the sounds of music and chatter, up at the stars above, "Doesn't the county fair count as a date?"

Billy puts his hand on top of Steve's, as much as he was comfortable with in public, in the center of downtown with everyone watching, and says with a smile that promised something more, "I guess it does, Harrington. I guess it does"

## 28. Day 28- Tanning

He just wasn't thinking about it, okay?

Steve lets the kids talk him into taking them to the public pool, because he's a pushover, then he stayed, because he's not stupid enough to leave them alone, but then because he is stupid in other ways, he sits out in the sun for hours, no sunscreen on, still wearing a shirt.

By the time the kids are telling him they're ready to go, he's sporting what must be the *worst* farmers tan to ever grace Hawkins community pool.

He tries to even it out in his own backyard, but he only gets burnt, despite the ridiculous amount of sunscreen he puts on, and now it's even more noticeable.

And because he is still very much an idiot, he goes with the brats to the pool again. This time he tries to bargain with them just to use his pool, since he never does, but they insist the public one is better because Steve doesn't have a vending machine, or a lifeguard, as Dustin points, unintentionally digging into an old wound because of what happened to Barb.

Either way, the lifeguard is exactly the reason he does *not* want to go to the community pool, because he just *knows* Billy's going to have something smart to say about the stupid tan lines; he has something smart to say about literally everything else Steve does.

Which, he's exactly right about that, because Billy makes a big show out of looking at him over his sunglasses, throwing his head back with an obnoxiously loud laugh that feels like it draws the attention of literally everyone at the pool.

"What happened to you Harrington? Spend too long workin' out in the field."

"Shut up man. Not all of us fit the stereotypes of where we're from."

“What’s that s’posed to mean?”

“It means you’re the one up in the lifeguard chair daydreaming about the surfing on ocean Cali boy. And don’t even get me started on the slang.”

Billy looks at him deadpan, and wisecracks, directly making fun of Steve’s accent, “D’y’all really wanna talk ‘bout slaang?”

“Whatever, Hargrove. Dont’cha got lives to save or something?” Steve cringes at how Billy’s mockery had his accent more noticeable, and at the smile on Billy’s face that said he knew he’d got to him, and avoids him and his stupid staring until the kids were finally done.

Billy comes into Scoops the very next day, stepping right up to the counter with a scowl on his face, but that’s not what Steve was looking at.

Because Billy had gotten horribly sun burnt, his freckles like little black spots under a dark shade of red covering most of his face, except for around his eyes, where there was a very obvious tan line in the shape of his sunglasses, even worse than Steve’s farmer’s tan.

“Not a word out of you, Harrington.”

“You look miserable.”

“Probably because I am.” Billy runs a hand through his hair, and says like it’s not bothering him. “I look ridiculous.”

“Hey it’s not so bad. At least your freckles stand out now.” Steve jabs, knowing very well that Billy hated his freckles, laughing when he scrunches his nose at the comment and winces through his teeth. “Quit your complaining, Billy. It’s just a sunburn.”

“Fuck off. Bet you’re still whining about that ridiculous tan you got.” Billy teases, making Steve bite back with a, “Actually I’m not. Some of us don’t hinge all of our self confidence on our looks.”

“Yeah, well, some of us don’t have much else to be proud of.”

"I didn't mean it like that." Steve says, the longer it sits heavy in the air, the more implications he gets from Billy's response, "You don't really believe that, do you?"

"Drop it, Steve."

Thinking he's blowing off his attempt at reconciliation, Steve huffs, "No. I'm tired of this, Billy."

"Of what? You saying things you regret because you have no goddamn social awareness and me pretending it doesn't bother me."

"It's not like that! I thought you would think I was too annoying just like everyone else, so I tried to be sarcastic or whatever like you."

"You're doing a piss poor job at it." Billy scoffs, turner even redder in the face, if that's even possible, "I made fun of your stupid sunburn so you thought you could be an ass to me?"

"No I'm not *trying* to be an ass that's what I said. I want you to *like* me."

"Wait a second, are you telling me that you're pullin' my pigtails, Harrington?"

"I- no way, man." Steve insists, blushing.

"You *are*." Billy smirks, and tells him like he hadn't just been pissed off at him, "Make that cone a shake, and meet me around back on your break."

If Steve knew all it took to get a date from Billy Hargrove was getting embarrassing tan lines, he would've done that months ago.



## 29. Day 29- Pillow

The first time Steve is allowed to visit Billy's new place, a tiny fixer upper paid for with his government checks, all of the in-home nurses are gone, and he's independent enough to at least answer the door when Steve shows up.

But there's still something off with him, and Steve can tell the whole time he's there. He asks him, "Is everything alright? Your new place treating you well?"

Billy scoffs, goes on a tirade about how much it is very much not treating him well, "The floors are creaky, the bathroom grows mold, I can hear everything that happens outside through the walls. It's a piece of shit."

Steve sees the look in his eye that says he's holding back, so he probes, "And?"

"And it's fucking hell being on my own here all the time." Billy says, not looking at Steve.

"Tell me about it." Steve says and Billy scoffs in agreement, but he wants to hear more, so he tells him, "No, I'm serious, I wanna know so I can see if I can help you."

"I can't look out the windows at night, so if I hear something I'm just holed up in here terrified 'til the sun comes up. I can't use the stove. I shower cold and the water pressure sucks." Billy sighs, and shrugs his shoulders, like he doesn't care even though he's very obviously bothered by his living situation, "I hate it here. Strike me down now, but I'd almost rather be in Neil's house."

Steve doesn't know what to say other than, "Why didn't you tell anybody it was so bad?" but that must strike a nerve with Billy, because he snaps, sounding exhausted, "Because I can handle myself, Harrington."

Steve doesn't take the bait though, he knows better than to do that anymore, knows why Billy ever threw the line out in the first place,

so he offers instead a genuine, "But you shouldn't have to."

"Look it's not a big deal. Life goes on, you know? I can't ask everybody to focus all their attention on me 24/7."

"If that's what you need, then you absolutely can. It's not your fault if you need help, and not everybody's going to be bothered by giving it, you know."

Defensive, Billy asks, "Yeah, well, you offering?" and again Steve shuts down his attempt at arguing, telling him, "I was getting there actually. Would you be into having a roommate?"

The thing that shocks him is, Billy doesn't say no, he narrows his eyes and asks him, "You gonna baby me?"

"Not unless you want me to."

"I only have one bed."

"I can sleep on the couch."

"Do you really wanna deal with all *this*?" This one Billy asks pointedly, motioning to the medications lined up on his coffee table, the oxygen tank sitting next to him.

"I don't think helping you out counts as 'dealing with' anything."

"Fine. But I have ground rules." Billy says after thinking about it for a long while, then lays them out, "No hogging the bathroom, no leaving shit around, no playing shitty music on my player, and absolutely no inviting the brats over."

"Fair enough. Can I throw one suggestion out there though?" Steve asks hesitantly, continuing when Billy nods at him, "No pushing each other away. We're gonna be living together, we've got to leave behind all our high school bullshit."

Billy looks up at him, and says simply, "I already left that all on the mall floor."

So it was decided. In what was probably the most spur of the moment choice he had ever made, Steve would be moving in with Billy. Two days later he shows back up at his door with a trunk load of his things, Billy waiting for him on the porch while he get out the two suitcases he'd been able to fill.

"S'that all you brought?"

"I only own like, a handful things in my house. My parents didn't let me take much." Steve feels uncomfortable suddenly, worries this was a bad choice and he made it too hastily, "Is that a bad thing? I don't want it to seem like I'm trying to mooch off of you or something."

"Nah, I was just expecting you to have a bunch of rich boy luggage or something." Billy opens the door for him, letting him drag his suitcases in and adds, "Think it's better like this anyhow."

"It is a pretty small space." Steve points out, to which Billy agrees, "Yeah, but... I think- I think it'll be better with you around."

That makes Steve smile, reminds him of how things are going to be now that he was going to be living with Billy, and he assures him, "I think it will be."

Because there was pretty much nothing to unpack, they make quick work of it, all he had room (or permission) to pack was his clothes, anything personal, and a single pillow off of his bed anyways.

Steve gets his first taste of what helping Billy take care of himself ensues, only an hour after getting settled in having to hold Billy's hair back when an especially bad coughing fits makes him sick, and help him through a panic attack when he turned on the stove; he thought that before Billy had meant it didn't work, not that he was terrified of it.

His first night there, after Billy slinked off into his room to get some sleep, Steve takes his one pillow and lays down on the couch, but he can't sleep. It's a thrifted feather couch, and not only does he think it's disgusting, sleeping on pretended furniture, but he's pretty sure he's allergic to the feathers inside.

He's in the kitchen, just sitting at the table with a glass of water from the fridge when Billy pops his head into the room, announcing his presence with a "You don't have to sleep on the couch."

"Well you're not in any shape to." He says back, making it known he was absolutely not going to be talked into making Billy sleep in his own living room, "It's fine, Billy."

"No I meant that you could sleep in my bed. I-If you wanted to." Billy rambles, staring at the tiled floor instead of at Steve while he talks, "You don't even have your own blanket so I thought you'd want to.. I don't know, just forget I said anything man. My meds must be makin' me loopy."

"No I want to." Steve dumps his cup in the sink and grabs the singular pillow from the living room, telling Billy with a soft smile, "Like I said, no shutting each other out, right?"

"Right, uh, it's probably smaller than what you're used to, but it's a bed I guess."

The bed is big enough that they don't have to touch, laying back to back in a pile of comforters too hot for Steve, but perfectly suited to how cold Billy was anymore. It's tense, feels like there's some energy between them until Billy's scratchy voice, muffled by the CPAP breaks the silence, "Steve?"

He responds, rolling over onto his back in the bed, "Yeah?"

Billy does this same, his voice cracking as he asks, staring up at the ceiling, "Why are you doing this for me?"

"Because you deserve it, Billy and I care about you." Steve admits honestly.

"Don't flatter me, Harrington." Billy mumbles in response, but then his hand is finding Steve's between them, lacing their fingers together and squeezing gently. He whispers into the dark, "I care about you too, Steve. Thank you."

### 30. Day 30- Lily of the valley

There are very few things Billy actually remembers about his mother.

That can be pretty hard for him to swallow at times, the fact that he lost so much of his childhood to trauma, his mind blocking out even the good memories because of his father.

He still remembers the way she smelled when she held him, but he didn't know the name of the scent she wore, and he remembers the sound of her voice, though he had long ago come to terms with the fact that he'd never hear it again, but the one thing he remembers so clearly about his mother is the lily of the valley tattoo on her forearm.

Neil had hated it from the day she got it, always making her cover it up with bracelets and long sleeves and makeup, but as a kid, Billy was fascinated by it. He would trace over it with his little fingers, the tiny flowers tattooed dark on his mother's arm, connecting the dots between moles and freckles and petals.

One thing he doesn't quite remember though, is the way she had cried when he asked if this mark hurt when he touched it like the ones his daddy left on her.

Neil seem to remember it just as well, deliberately mowing over valley lilies when they sprouted or spraying them with weed killer, so one day Billy decides, fuck it, he's tired of seeing the one thing that truly reminds him of his mother get destroyed.

On his eighteenth birthday, Billy gets the same tattoo.

His is on his shoulder instead, in his head he thought it would look a little tougher there, at least as tough as a flower tattoo his hippie mom used to sport could. Of course, Neil is just as angry with him as he was the first time when his girlfriend came home with the same thing, probably even more so now that it was his son.

The bandage is only off for like, a week before Neil's punishment

comes, which, Billy guesses he should be at least a little grateful that he waited for all the bleeding and peeling to be over before he kicked his ass.

His dad's not the only one that has a problem with it though, the first time Billy shows up at work without it covered, Billy gets *lots* of comments and sneers behind his back, all sorts of people who don't know him saying they thought he was soft, feminine, a huge fucking pansy.

He didn't think he should have to justify it to them, he lost his mother, he's damn well allowed to get something on his body to commemorate her if he pleases, but it's hard not to get a *little* defensive about it. He almost regrets it, not thinking it through more before he got these delicate flowers emblazoned on his skin, but that's very much an almost.

Because one night he stands in front of his mirror and traces over the stems, the delicate petals, connecting them to the light freckles around it, blood that soap wouldn't quite reach still dried under his fingernails from the number Neil did on him earlier, and he cries like a damn baby, but he lets go of all that other stuff.

He got it for *her*, for his momma wherever she was still waiting for him, maybe still looking for him even, not for all of those assholes, and not to prove anything about himself.

So he wears it with pride, he tears the damn sleeves off of his shirts and wears jeans instead of a jacket if it's a cooler day, and the comments stop coming, because it's not as fun to say shit that doesn't get a reaction anymore.

But the rumors don't stop, and everyone knows as they spread, they change, and suddenly instead of Billy Hargrove being a pussy bitch, the mills churning out nastier shit, like Billy Hargrove's a faggot, and it's not safe to have him at the public pool.

There's a long battle between him and Heather and the managers, and the pool begrudgingly lets him stay, but it's not without *lots* of rules. He'd almost rather quit, with how short a leash he's kept on, but he *needs* that job if he doesn't want kicked out.

That's what he's complaining about to Steve one day over a smoke, sitting in the back room of the Harrington's with the sliding door cracked so the smoke could drift out, not that Mr. and Mrs. Harrington would be home anytime soon to notice it.

Steve's the first person other than Neil to know it was for his momma, and the look he gives him, the sadness and concern in those big brown eyes, it's enough to make him want to laser that damned tattoo off himself.

He'll blame the weed for what he does next, lacing his fingers through Steve's before he can start the pity party, but he hopes Steve doesn't do the same when he makes the choice to lean over and kiss Billy, delicate fingers barely gracing the dark ink on his shoulder, the others getting lost in tangles of blond hair.

It helps him feel not so bad about the whole thing, getting that burden off his chest, and the kiss with Steve didn't hurt either, but the next day it's back to the same old thing at work.

After another week or so though, he notices the gossip has changed, and this time they're saying Steve's name instead of his. Steve Harrington's the pansy faggot now, and Billy has to pretend until he can get out of that chair that he isn't terrified for the both of them.

He goes straight to Steve's house after work, tells him as soon as he finds him, "I swear I didn't tell *anybody*, I don't know how it got out."

And Steve doesn't look panicked at all, but rather he gives this little smug smile at Billy and says, "I do." calmly enough that Billy can actually feel his heart shatter, even worse than it had when he woke to find his mother's car missing.

Steve doesn't let Billy stew in that heartbreak too long though before he clarifies, "I didn't want you to have to deal with all that bullshit alone, so I got this." He holds his wrist out, and shows Billy that he has his own tattoo now too; a sunflower in the same style as Billy's, thick black outlines with no color.

"I figure, once the initial drama blows over, now that there's two of

us, they won't be able to say as much." Steve explains further, looking hopefully at Billy's face

"Maybe. But until then, you could be in danger, and you're going to be in even bigger trouble. Seriously, what's John gonna say?" Billy scolds, panicking on Steve's behalf whether or not it was necessary.

"And what did Neil say?" Steve argues back, but he knows that's not productive, so he switches to trying to be comforting instead, "Look Billy, I wanted to do this. For you *and* for me."

"It was stupid of you." Billy says under his breath, taking up Steve's pale wrist in both of his hands, gently brushing his thumb over the just healed barely healed tattoo, "Sunflowers were your aunts favorites too, weren't they?"

"Mhm, and I don't regret it, Billy. I love you too much." Steve says, the first time he had ever said those three words.

Billy smiles and bends down, bringing his lips to that little monochrome image, and mumbles against soft skin, "Love you too, sunflower."